The Last Dance

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The Last Dance (1)

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Hey Guys! So this is my first time writing anything and I would LOVE some feedback or suggestions. I have an idea for how I want the story to turn out but its all in my head right now so I can be pretty flexible. Anyway, hope you enjoy it, cliche love stories never get old right? Let me know what you think! Thanks =) xo.

P.S::: PLEASE DON'T ADVERTISE YOUR STORY IN THE COMMENTS; I HAVE A SPECIAL PAGE FOR THAT SO USE IT AND HAVE SOME COURTESY.

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Chapter 1 -Nostalgic

I opened one of the massive double doors at the back of the castle and slipped in unnoticed. The ballroom was dimly lit and dusty, beautiful, but only a ghost of what it would look like in two months during the High Ball. I'd been coming here a lot lately over the last month leading up to my 19th birthday. I always came in from the ground floor doors, never having the courage to come in from the upper level at the top of the grand staircase. I would have my turn up there soon enough, on May 15 in fact, only two months away; too soon.

It happened every year, girls all over the Kingdom who were 19 came for their chance to be presented to court, or more specifically to be presented to all of the eligible bachelors at court. It was a long standing tradition of Highbourne, giving

all the common girls a chance to dress up, get their names announced at the top of the stairs, and float down the grand staircase to join the ranks of adults. All girls expected their dreams to come true that day. The week of celebrations was all about them, the married women even wore delicate masks during the balls so everyone knew who was available. I stopped attending when I was 11, it wasn't for young girls anyway; I usually got to go because of my father's position with the King, but I remember my last one like it was yesterday, it was the day Annabelle had her chance at the top.

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I sighed wistfully, and ran my hands over the banister. I'd grown up at the castle too, but there wasn't anyone special in my life. Unlike my sister, I never aspired to be a lady of the realm; or not in the traditional way at least. I had my friends among the ladies who lived at the castle, and my playmates among the young boys, but only for training. The only one I was forced to see outside the practice courts was the Prince, who'd grown up even more arrogant and condescending than he'd been that day.

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My grip tightened on the banister, just thinking about him made me angry, but it didn't matter, things had changed. I loosened my grip and looked at my distorted reflection in a gilded pillar. Pretty, I thought, but no Annabelle. I had her grace, but not her commanding presence. Mother Nature had rushed to endow me when I turned 13, maybe so generously because it came so late. Not that you could really see, I gave up on big gowns that night almost 8 years

ago and always wore the loose practice clothes favoured by men. Mine ranged from casual to quite elegant and got me some disgraceful looks from older women with a more refined sense of propriety, but really, they were much more practical for my lifestyle. The Queen helped me design them, even wore them herself on occasion, and their opinion, besides my parents, were all that mattered. I looked back at the staircase. I would be wearing a gown that day, in all its cumbersome glory, but no matter, I'd mastered the art of wearing them years ago and smiled, no way would I be falling down the stairs. I looked to the right, at the doors leading off to a private garden and my smile disappeared. I walked over and inched open the door. It was well cared for, but on the night of the ball, all the trees and bushes would be glowing with white fairy lights, the pathways would be lit up periodically with pink Chinese lanterns. It may sound magical, but brought nothing but sadness to me. It was here, on a bench under the cherry blossom tree that Anna had found me.

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I found myself under the old cherry blossom tree and looked down the path we'd used to practice walking all those years ago. If I closed my eyes and listened hard I could almost hear our laughter while we strutted back and forth and it brought a smile to my face. I looked up at the sun and realized with a jolt more time had passed then I thought. I took one last look around and headed off to the practice courts.

The Last Dance (2)

Chapter 2 - Birthdays and Bulls-eye's

As I approached the yard I could hear the sounds of chattering boys and laughing girls all up for their morning practice. I swung by the stables where I'd left my equipment and shouted a hello to the stableman Erik.

"Mornin' to you too Miss Chalot, off to the archery range I see."

"I sure am, can't start slacking if I want to keep up with the boys."

"Them's the one's that should be worryin' Miss, no aim as deadly as yours."

I smiled, touched, and turned to leave when he stopped me again.

"Now wait Miss, I knew I be forgetting something, a very Happy Birthday to ye, that a new bow you got?"

I beamed at him "Thank-you, and yes, it's an early gift from Mother, I'm dying to try it out."

"I won't keep ye then, be sure to show 'em boys what a lady can do."

"Don't worry Erik, I always do."

I grinned and headed off towards the target boards passing the jousting yard and outdoor practice court on the way. Various other stable hands and people of court wished me a

Happy Birthday. I smiled my thanks to them all and ran the last few feet when I saw Lily and Mira leaning against the fence. "Celia!" they yelled in unison. I laughed as I was caught up in their hugs.

"Finally, your nineteen," Exclaimed Mira.

Lily chimed in immediately "How does it feel, do you feel older? Wiser?"

I laughed, "I feel just the same as I did yesterday and the day before, do I look any different?"

"Nope, same old Cee, looking ready to kick butt as always" laughed Lily.

"Ohh but with a nicer bow!" Mira yanked the bow from my grasp and ran her hands along it. "Beautiful, who from?"

"My Mother, she surprised me with it this morning."

"Well, lets see what you can do with it then" she said while holding the bow out to me. I smiled, feeling my adrenaline shoot up as I hopped over the fence and accepted my bow.

Lily and Mira choose to run to the gate instead of jumping the fence like I had and soon joined me with their own bows in hand. We lined up each facing our own targets. I pulled back the string on my bow a few times, getting a feel for the elastic before fitting an arrow. I glanced over at Lily who nodded and counted to three.

We loosened at the same time. Mira's arrow overshoot and flew over the target, Lily hit the second ring, and I smiled in triumph as my arrow flew straight and true into the red circle in the middle. Bulls-eye. We turned around at the sound of clapping.

Prince Johnathan was leaning against the fence looking bored while his friends, David and Luke clapped enthusiastically. I smiled at them and they jumped over the fence to join us.

"Impressive shot Cee," David said giving me a friendly clap on the shoulder.

Luke swept me a flamboyant bow. "I yield from now my Lady, remind me never to challenge you to archery or the men will lose what little respect for me they have," He said with a smile.

I laughed and ruffled his hair. "You know I'd be happy to let you win if it was a matter of saving your pride," I teased.

"I'll be calling you on that!" He said with a grin. Luke turned his attention to Mira and Lily sweeping them another grand bow. "Ladies."

By this time John had reluctantly decided to heave himself over the fence and make his way over. I braced myself for whatever he would say determined not to let him ruin my day when David cut in.

"Happy Birthday by the way Celia," He said with a smile.

Luke turned around and threw a hand across my shoulders. "Yes, welcome to adulthood, but before you get too excited there's really no perks involved. You would have done better to stay 18," He said matter-of-factly.

David started laughing. "She hardly had a choice."

"Now now boys play nice" Mira chimed in, "Cee's the last one of us to turn nineteen, and in two months we'll all be presented at the High Ball together" she said

enthusiastically. My smile faltered for a minute and John choose that moment to speak up.

"If you ask me she could use a couple more years" He drawled, "It'll take at least that long for her to learn how to be a REAL lady" He finished with a smirk.

I took a deep breathe determined not to lose my temper. "Well, it's a good thing no one asked you then," I replied coolly.

David turned to me with a wink before John could say anything else. "Don't worry Cee, you're lady enough for me."

Luke tugged me to his side. "Sorry David, I call dibs."

"What? You can't call dibs, Cee! Tell him you like me better."

I laughed and pulled back to stand between Mira and Lily who were giggling helplessly while John looked on annoyed.

"Don't worry boys, there's enough of me for both of you."

"If you're done throwing yourself at MY friends--" John started to say before David clapped his hand over his mouth.

"I think this would be our cue to leave," He said before dragging a fuming Johnathan away.

"Ladies," Luke said, tipping a fake hat towards us. We all promptly mimed him a curtsy before he dashed off to help David with the Prince.

We waited until they were well away before bursting into another round of giggles

"Oh those boys' are such teases!" Mira said. Lily nodded her head in agreement. "I pity their having to deal with the Prince after this."

"Don't worry Lil', they know how to handle him, which is more then I can say for anyone else"

We picked up our discarded bows and got ready to fire again.

After about half an hour I decided to call it quits and waved goodbye to Mira and Lily. Heading back towards the stable I ran into one of the Castle maids.

"Millie! How are you?"

"Good my Lady, and Happy Birthday"

"Thanks, and please Millie, call me Celia, Any court gossip?"

She laughed "Not yet my Lady, but the day is young."

Growing up in the Castle I learned fast that the staff were the best company, they always seemed to know everything that went on, always knew the latest court gossip and scandals, and were always happy to keep you company.

"Millie can you take my bow up to my rooms for me?"

"Of course Lady--I mean Celia"

While it was fairly easy getting the staff to feel comfortable and friendly around me, getting them to drop the 'Lady' title was a losing battle.

I walked into the stable and headed towards Coriolis. She was a beautiful bay mare who I'd had since she was a filly. I

pulled an apple out of my pocket to give her while I pulled down her tack and saddled up.

I glanced over at the other stalls and noticed that Shadow, the Prince's mount was missing and hoped I wouldn't run into him on the trails.

"Will ye be needin' an escort Miss?"

I turned around to see Erik leaning over the rail.

"No, I'm just taking the usual trail; I should be back in a few hours at the most."

I led Coriolis out of the stall and mounted up, heading for the trail through Grovet Woods. As soon as I passed the first line of trees I felt more relaxed.

The archery had helped to lessen my tension, but what I really needed was to be on my own for a bit. It was a peaceful day, all the sounds from the castle grounds disappeared until all you could hear was the sounds of birds and the steady beat of hoofs against the ground. To me it was the most soothing sound in the world.

After cantering around for a bit along the trail I found my usual mark off the road, the pine tree that grew crooked trying to catch the sun's rays. I smiled and tied Coriolis' reins to the tree knowing she had plenty to graze on.

I took a brief look around making sure I was alone, pushed aside a leafy branch and slipped through the hole in the trees. Coming out I set my eyes on my favourite clearing. It wasn't anything spectacular, just a nice private glade surrounded by wild flowers. My favourite part about it was the weeping willow tree right in the middle, so out of place, I always wondered how it grew here.

I sighed contentedly and sat on the convenient knot from the roots laying my head back against the trunk. I had just opened the book I brought when a twig snapping caught my attention. I leaped up annoyed that I hadn't thought to bring a weapon when I heard the rough swear that followed and narrowed my eyes at the opening I'd just come in from.

I knew that voice anywhere.

With a showering of needles John fell into the clearing, barely managing to keep upright. He looked up at me with a smirk and, completely ignoring my glare, began walking around the clearing.

"So, this is where you always disappear off to, and here I'd hoped it would be something interesting like a raging love affair, but of course you're too boring to ever do anything fun like that"

I walked over to him, trying to control my anger.

"How did you find me here?" I demanded.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "I followed you obviously."

"That's not possible, the path was empty, I checked!"

"Not well enough," He smirked. I glared at him again and tapped my foot impatiently waiting for the real answer.

He rolled his eyes "Fine, I was walking Shadow up the path and saw you just before you slipped though, convenient eh?"

I huffed and turned away "Well now that you've seen it you can GO AWAY, and STAY away!'

"Not so fast, I just got here." He came up from behind me and snatched the book from my hands.

"Even worse then I thought, you came out here to read!"

"So? There's nothing more attractive than intelligence."

"Like you'd know," he said with a scoff.

"Give it back John."

"Say please," he teased holding it up out of reach.

I was about to get angry when I remembered the advice Anna had given me a few years ago

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I smiled, now seemed like as good a time as any to try out Anna's advice. I stepped up close to John until we were only inches apart and looked up at him with a pout. He stumbled back looking confused and flustered. I fought to hide a smile; looks like Anna knew what she was talking about.

I stepped up to him again, taking a deep breath and holding it in. His gaze flickered down and back up to my face trying to figure out what I was doing "Please?" I whispered.

His eyes widened in shock and he lowered his hand unconsciously. I snatched the book back as soon as it was close and smirked up at him.

"Thanks."

I turned around and heard him clearing his throat, and then he was right behind me.

"Hey, when'd you turn into a girl Cece?" I rolled my eyes, generously ignoring the use of his childhood nickname for me and turned back around to find us face to face. We both took a startled step back. Weird I thought, his face didn't have his usual condescending expression, just curiosity.

"It's called growing up John."

"Huh." I raised my eyebrow waiting for the snarky comment but it didn't come so I turned back again and walked over to the willow tree.

I sat down and saw that John was still in the same spot with a puzzled look on his face. It took a minute for him to realize I was staring.

"Right, well, err, I'll just go then." He walked abruptly to the entrance and turned around one last time before leaving, giving me a confused look.

"Happy Birthday then, uh, bye."

I frowned; maybe Anna's advice had worked a little too well. I shook my head and opened my book.

The Last Dance (3)

Chapter 3 - Party Crashers

I headed back to the castle in the late afternoon, not looking forward to the big party I'd had to arrange. What was the big deal anyway? But of course it was a big deal, to everyone else. I sighed and headed into the stable; no one was around. I smiled, grateful for another few minutes of silence before I got caught up in the preparations for the party.

Well, at least I managed to convince everyone that it was only a casual party, meaning that I wouldn't have to wear anything special for the occasion. A small blessing I guess. I rubbed down Coriolis taking more time than was needed before reluctantly headed in. It was silly really, I used to love getting all dressed up. I remember when I was younger always begging to wear my sister's gowns, borrowing my mothers jewels, asking to wear those pretty shades of rouge, and shoes that I couldn't even stand up in. And now I couldn't be bothered, it seemed so pointless, so superficial. But then again, I suppose it did have its merits, I mean look what happened in the clearing, and I hadn't even been dressed up. Still, my lack of femininity never stopped the palace boys from their teasing, I smiled thinking back to this morning.

"Miss Celia is that you?"

Drat, spotted.

"There you are! Lady Mira and Lily have been looking all over for you."

I sighed, "I suppose they have, where shall I meet them?"

"In the east wing they said."

"Alright, thanks Jonna."

She smiled at me. "My Lady, no need to be so glum, and on your birthday too!"

"It's all just a big bother Jonna."

"Oh, what a thing to say, hush now and put on a smile, this has been the talk of the castle for weeks. And between you and me, these girls need something to look forward to."

I sighed and headed down the hallway. I'd invited all the girls staying at court, most of whom I'd hardly exchanged two words with. It was going to be a long, and dull night.

"Cee! There you are, where have you been."

I plastered on a smile and ran to meet Lily.

"Sorry! I completely lost track of the time!" Not a complete lie...

"Oh, you must be so excited."

"Er, sure, can't wait." She grabbed my hand and started pulling me reluctantly down the hall.

"Ok, so, everything is set for a girl's night in! We've got music and food, and they dragged piles of pillows and comfy chairs into the east ballroom."

"That sounds nice"

"Plus Mira and I got some of the girls together early and covered the room in silky drapes and streamers, really Cee it's gorgeous, even YOU won't be able to stay depressed!"

"What? I'm not depressed, I told you I can't wait, it's going to be so much fun."

She looked back to roll her eyes at me. "Please Celia, like we don't know you'd rather stay out all night in the stocks than attend your own party."

"That's not true, I'd end up with a sore neck for a week!"

"Oh, you know what I mean, but just you wait, we're determined to make sure you have a good time."

"Why doesn't that sound reassuring?"

She laughed and continued pulling me along. "Ok, we're here, let the pampering begin."

"This is a casual party Lil, no way am I going to be the only one dressed up!"

"I didn't SAY dressed up, but you still have to look nice, come on Cee, humour us please?"

I sighed, "Alright but you better not go overboard."

"Well duh, there would just be no living with you if you weren't comfortable, honestly you're more high maintenance then the Prince sometimes."

"Lily!"

She smiled "Don't worry we still love you" We finally reached where ever we were going and Lily pushed me into a small

room where Mira was standing in front of a mirror with all kinds of... was it make-up?... lined up.

"Oh come on guys, do I really look that bad?"

"Course not Cee," Mira piped in "We just want you to look special on your Birthday, you know you're gorgeous without it."

I looked at the products suspiciously. "If I look fine then I'd rather not put all that junk on my face."

"Oh relax," Mira said before pushing me down into a chair "I'll only put a little on, I swear, you won't even know its there."

"Then why put it on?"

"Cause WE'LL know its on."

"And for your outfit..." Lily moved aside to let me see the clothes laid out on the bed. "Oh, wow"

I got up to take a closer look. There was a pair of three quarter length pants in a soft blue color and silk instead of the cotton I usually wore. The top was a darker silk blue than the pants with a pale silvery-grey lace trim. And finally, there was a tunic that pulled the outfit together that looked fitted and long, almost like a dress. I smiled, it was beautiful.

"It was a gift from your parents."

I hadn't heard Mira come up behind me. "They got it made especially for you, it's a dress and pants all in one, brilliant huh?"

"Its perfect."

She grinned "Excellent, and now that you're in a good mood, on to the makeup" I groaned and sat down resigned.

Lily pulled out my messy bun and started fussing with my hair while Mira started applying things to my face.

"Quit scrunching your face up Cee or I'll end up poking you in the eye."

With great effort I stayed still until they were done. After what seemed like a million years they stepped back to look at their work. I fidgeted, nervous under their scrutiny.

"Well? does it look alright?"

They smiled in unison "You tell us" Mira said.

I took a deep breath and turned to face the mirror. Oh. Oh my. Wow.

The person staring back looked like a stranger, but still me. Does that make sense? I tilted my head to the side and the mirror girl did too. Yes, definitely me. I leaned in closer. My light grey eyes had a thin line of dark blue kohl framing the upper lid and a dusting of silver shadow that you only noticed when the light hit it just right making it shimmer. My pale face looked the same with a dash of rouge that made it look like I was faintly blushing. Mira had also put something on my lips to make them look a slightly darker shade of their natural pink. Lily had put my hair back up in a bun but left a few curls lose to frame my face. Not bad, not bad at all. I still looked like myself, but I felt different. I turned around and threw myself at my friends. We all fell back on the bed laughing.

"Stop it Cee... you're going to mess everything up" Mira said between laughs.

"That's right, now go put on that great outfit, people will be here any second."

I rushed and hugged the outfit to my chest dancing around the room. Lily laughed and ushered me into a closet to change. Alright, I was officially excited. The suit fit like a glove, I opened the closet and stepped out with a flourish. "Ta da! What do you think?"

"Aww Cee it's beautiful."

"It's not to much though?"

"Not a chance."

I rushed up to the mirror and gave a little sigh. It really was perfect, a dressed up version of what I usually wore. I gave an experimental twirl and the tunic floated out with me. Pretty, I thought, just like Anna.

The room was stunning, it was all dark and romantic. I thought with a pang that I was all dressed up and had no one to impress. With a sigh I walked in to greet everyone. Things were going good, people were in small groups around the room laughing and talking, lounging in the chairs when there was a sudden commotion from outside. I looked toward the doors just as they burst open and a huge group of boys, led by the Prince, burst in with wooden practice swords out and shouted "Huzzaahh!"

David stepped up beside John and grinned out at us all. "Don't worry ladies, we come in peace." That got a laugh out of everyone and before I knew it, everyone was mingling and flirting. David stood at the doors looking around and when he saw me, waved and came over.

"Hello Cee! Looking good, hope you don't mind the company." He said with a wink.

"You know I never mind your company David, and how could I be upset when you brought all these

young men with you?" I replied back glancing around at my new guests.

His smile widened into a cheeky grin. "Just consider it my Birthday present to you."

"Hey, it was my idea," John said from behind. I turned around to face him, and his eyes widened after taking me in. What was he doing staring at me anyway? He finally looked up as if remembering I was there.

"Is that you Cece? You look... different"

I rolled my eyes at him. Really, I didn't look that different, as if he hadn't known it was me the whole time. "I see those English tutors did their job" I said sarcastically "And don't call me Cece"

I waited for some snarky comeback but it never came, he just went back to staring at me oddly enough. I ignored him and turned back to talk to David.

John's POV

I stood by the doors looking for Celia; I wanted to see her expression when we all burst in here, but couldn't see her anywhere. I was still looking around when I saw David talking to a pretty girl in blue I'd never seen before. I walked over to hear him say "...Birthday present to you."

Wait, that's Celia?

"Hey, it was my idea" I said from behind.

She turned around and I took a surprised step back. She looked more girly then usual in clothes that were suprisingly flattering, when did she get a body like that? She was looking at me funny, and I realized I'd been staring, so I said the first thing that came to mind.

"Is that you Cece? You look... different"

She rolled her eyes at me "I see those English tutors did their job" she said sarcastically "And don't call me Cece."

Why did she always get mad at me for calling her that? Everyone else called her Cee, my nickname was not that different, in fact, I thought it was cute, she doesn't need to be so damn sensitive. Well, ok I always called her that because I knew she didn't like it, but I can't figure out why. Really, she should be flattered I even

a nickname for her.

She'd gone back to talking to David when I hadn't come up with a reply and I heard the end of their conversation

"...actually enjoying your party? Because that would be a first," David was saying.

She laughed, and I couldn't help but think that if I'd said that she would have glared at me.

"I know, I thought it would be torture but Lily and Mira were so excited, and my parents got me this beautiful outfit, I couldn't help but get caught up in it all." She twirled around and smiled at him. Wait a minute, was she FLIRTING with him?

David grinned and bowed. "A Lady shouldn't dance alone."

She laughed and took the hand he offered. I stood there annoyed at being forgotten. As if it wasn't bad enough that she was throwing herself at MY friend, but he was actually flirting back! I crossed my arms, most girls would kill for my attention, it's like she doesn't even CARE that I'm the Prince. I stormed off to find Luke, no way was I standing here watching my best friend and HER laughing and dancing together all night.

Celia's POV

The song David and I had been dancing to had just ended when Millie rushed up to me.

"My Lady, so sorry to bother you, but the King and Queen requested you to meet them in the small room outside if you please."

"I'll be right there Millie."

I turned back to David who gave me a silly bow. "Thanks, for the dance Cee, enjoy your party."

I smiled as he turned away to join his other friends. I looked around and was glad to see everyone enjoying themselves, well almost everyone.

John was standing in a corner scowling to Luke. What now? I thought he was so proud of having the boys storm my party.

I breathed out a sigh and rushed to find his parents.

"Ah, Celia, there you are," The Queen said with a smile.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not at all my dear," The King replied. "I'm sure you had your hands full, what with my son causing trouble," he said with a friendly grin.

"Oh, it's no trouble, I'm used to it, almost immune," I stated proudly. The King and Queen glanced at each other with a knowing smile. Was I missing something?

"Anyway dear, we just wanted to give you your birthday present."

"My.. oh! you didn't have to get me anything" I said blushing.

"Nonsense, you're nineteen now, it's a big day for you."

Without saying anything else they stepped aside and I let out a gasp.

The most beautiful gown was laying on the bed, a real gown this time. The top was a pale gold in color, and shaped like a corset with delicate gold beading along the top. There was a long flowing skirt with a layer of gold lace overtop. Starting from the waist, and covering the entire skirt of the dress was gold beading shaped liked flowers.

My eyes filled with tears, I didn't even know what to say so I turned around and hugged the King who just patted my back.

"There there my dear, we're glad you like it."

The Queen smiled as I turned to give her a hug. "We thought you could use something of your own since the last dress you wore was one of Anna's."

I laughed through my tears remembering that nightmare experience.

"I can't thank you enough."

"Who needs thanks when we're as close as family?" The Queen said with a smile.

I smiled back up at her. She shared another knowing look with her husband who then put his arm around her and lead her from the room.

"We'll leave you to get back to your party."

I nodded at them, still choked up and turned back to the dress. It was beautiful, and I really hadn't worn a dress in ages...

"Don't tell me you're trying that again."

I turned around to see John standing in the doorway. He smirked and walked passed me to the dress.

"It's too nice a dress to be wasted on you."

I crossed my arms feeling annoyed. "Well, that's not what your parents seemed to think."

"You do know why girls go through all the trouble of dressing up don't you?" He said, completely ignoring what I'd said. "It's so that they can find some poor innocent bastard and trick him into marriage."

"It's hardly a trick John, if the men are too busy looking down your dress to pay attention to what's going on."

"Exactly! You take advantage of us in a moment of weakness, what man wouldn't look at what's being handed

right to him? That doesn't mean we LIKE the person, much less want to be stuck with them for the rest of our lives."

I tried not to laugh, knowing where this attitude was coming from. Being a Prince, and twenty-one, John was probably expected to get married soon, or at least choose his bride, and every girl knew it even if he didn't. They craved his attention, practically throwing themselves at him, but for some reason he hated it. We both knew all they were after was his position. "My, you are a cynic."

He whipped his head around and caught my smile. "Well, I guess it makes no difference for you anyway," He said with a smirk.

I raised my eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that no guy would be distracted enough to marry YOU, no one wants a girl who runs around playing with swords and acting more like a boy than a girl." He said with a shudder.

Oh, he did not just say that.

"Excuse me?" I said icily.

John's POV

"Only that no guy would be distracted enough to marry YOU, no one wants a girl who runs around playing with swords and acting more like a boy than a girl" I said with a shudder.

Her eyes flashed in anger. "Excuse me?" she said icily. Whoa, I'd expected her to yell at me or something, but that calm voice was even worse. I gulped, maybe, just maybe I'd gone a little too far. She stepped forward looking furious and

I took an unconscious step back. I flinched when my elbow hit the door closed.

Not good.

"You want to say that again?" She said in that scary calm voice.

"Um.. uh.. n-no, I'm good" Oh shoot, did I just stutter? Annoyed, I said the first thing that came to mind.

"You don't have to be so touchy, I was only trying to be honest."

Before I knew what was happening she'd flashed to my side, whipped my wooden practice sword from my belt and had it pointing right between my eyes. Right, obviously not the right thing to say.

She smirked at me. "So easily disarmed,

, and by a girl no less." Every word was dripping with sarcasm and disdain. This was ridiculous, I wasn't going to be intimidated by

. I stood up straight and crossed my arms over my chest scowling at her.

"You're all talk, you wouldn't be so brave in a fair duel" I smirked at her and she smiled back with an angry glint in her eyes. I sensed I'd taken it too far yet again.

"Fine, if a fair duel's what you want--"

She tossed the sword up in the air, caught it by the tip and offered it to me by the hilt. I looked up at her dubiously, expecting a trick, and slowly reached my hand out to take it.

She didn't do anything. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

"Tomorrow at the practice courts."

Pardon? "What are you talking about Cece" I said with a sneer.

"Our duel of course, you insulted me and I accept your challenge, so I'll see you at dawn, and if you're not there I'll assume you concede."

My face turned hot with rage, she actually dared to fight me? Did she really think she would win? I glared at her but she'd already walked past me to the door. She opened it and gave me one last smirk before slamming the door shut in my face.

The Last Dance (4)

Chapter 4 - Duel

I woke up this morning buzzing with energy. After our big confrontation last night, I'd gone back to the party, completely wound up and angry. John of course hadn't made a second appearance.

I grimaced, feeling annoyed just thinking about him. The nerve he had, to say no one would want to be with me. But was it true?

No, I couldn't believe that, I wouldn't. My skills had never turned any boy away before, the only people who ever looked down on me were the older generation of women who didn't think girls belonged on the field. I sighed, why did I always let him get to me, make me lose my temper? Not that I wasn't looking forward to our duel today. I couldn't wait to finally put him in his place. And it would be a learning experience, I loved having a new opponent, even if it

the Prince.

I got out of bed to answer a knock at the door, and opened it up to see Millie standing outside.

"Hello Miss Celia, how are you this morning?"

"Fine Millie, today's a big day" I said with a grin.

Her forehead crinkled up as she frowned. "I thought that was yesterday."

"Oh, I'm not talking about my birthday."

"What then my Lady?"

I leaned forward conspiratorially, "I'm fighting the Prince today!" I said excitedly.

Her eyes widened in concern. "Are you sure that's wise Miss?"

"Oh, don't worry Millie, I don't plan to lose" I said smugly.

"That's what worries me Miss" She set fretfully.

"What do you mean?" I asked frowning.

"Only that... well the Prince is a proud lad, he won't take well to losing my Lady, and he'll end up making a spectacle of himself mark my words!" She shifted about nervously and I gently led her into the room and sat her down on my bed. "Is it really necessary Miss? Do you have to fight him?"

"You don't know what he said Millie." I said softly, feeling on the verge of tears.

She took my hands and pulled me down beside her. "What did he do?" She said with wide eyes. I explained our argument yesterday, and when I was done she lifted a handkerchief to dab my wet eyes. I hadn't even realized I was crying.

"Now Miss, you and I both know that isn't true, but you go and do what you have to do. It wasn't right what he said."

I nodded and she squeezed my hand sympathetically.

"I'll leave you to get ready then." She walked to the door and was just about to leave when she turned back.

"Oh, I almost forgot the whole reason I came here in the first place."

She pulled a small box from her apron and handed it me.

"We found it in the small room you got ready in last night when we were cleaning. There was no note, but I assumed it was for you."

I smiled my thanks to her and she left, shutting the door behind her. I opened the delicate paper around the box and opened it with a gasp. Inside was a bracelet. It was made out of three chains of silver braided together with small opals dangling down every few knots. It was beautiful, and no one had even left a note? Who wouldn't take credit for such a lovely gift? I wondered. Maybe it was from David, he would be the type to just leave something around for me to find later. I smiled, I would have to ask him about it, but first I had a duel to get through.

I threw on my most comfortable practice clothes and began some exercises that started out easy and grew into a complex dance. I came out of the last pose breathing hard but feeling refreshed. I walked to the door and hesitated a moment before picking the bracelet up from my bed and admiring it once more before dropping it into my pocket.

I was the first one down to the practice court and took my time selecting a wooden practice sword. After going through a few I found one that felt comfortable and did some practice swings. Satisfied I went outside and sat down with the sword laid across my lap to wait.

John showed up moments later with an impressive sneer on his face and half a dozen of his friends trailing behind. What a shame, I thought, now he'll have an audience to see him lose. I stayed seated on the ground while John gave me a

scathing look before going into the shed to select his weapon. The boys ambled up to me and Luke offered me a hand up.

"Hello, Cee, I see you've managed to get our Prince into quite a mood," He said with a chuckle.

"He got there himself, I just showed him the way."

David laughed "Well, either way, we'll be here to help him up off his Royal arse" He said with a wink. The other boys laughed their agreement.

I smiled and shook my head in pity. Even his friends didn't think he would win. Just then John walked out of the shed and strutted confidently over. I rolled my eyes while the boys patted my back and wished me luck as they went to stand on the sidelines. John scowled at them and I muffled a laugh. He directed his glare at me.

"Let's get this over with, I don't have all day to humour your pretty notions of a duel."

I raised my eyebrow at him and smirked without giving him a reply. Pulling my hair into a tight knot I took my place. He might get under my skin, but not here, not when I was fighting. I took a deep breath and the whole world disappeared leaving only me and John. I felt a complete sense of calm wash over me as he stood there lazily.

We bowed, keeping our eyes on each other the whole time. He came up and swung at me hard. I instantly brought up my sword and stepped out of the way causing him to stumble with surprise. He'd never seen me on the field before either. I smiled grimly while he regained his balance and faced me looking flustered. I let him continue the offence while I coolly blocked his every move. He came after

me furiously but his temper caused his swings to be more wild and clumsy with every pass and I blocked them easily. He faked left, I anticipated his move. He swung at my hips, I parried and danced to the side.

"This isn't dance class you know." He huffed out between swings. He was tired, swinging at me non-stop without strategy.

Fine, I thought, and swung my sword at his chest. He barely got his sword up in time, but I immediately pressed the attack. I lunged at his legs and he managed to block me in time, but fumbled and winced when his fingers got in the way. I forced him to walk back in order to block my moves and his eyes widened in shock. He was getting nervous now and making even more amateur mistakes. Idiot, who taught him how to fight anyway? He would never be a good swordsman if he let his emotions make him mess up.

There, an opening.

I pushed my sword up between his arms and cut sideways knocking the sword from his hands.

Check and mate.

His jaw dropped open as he stared at me, then down at his sword in disbelief. I felt a pang of guilt at the pained look in his eyes but he deserved it, or at least that was what I kept telling myself. I looked over at the boys, some of them were cheering and laughing while others forlornly handed some coins over. They'd made bets on who would win? David looked up after collecting some money from Luke and winked at me.

Now I really felt bad, his own friends had bet against him. I turned abruptly and started walking away before any of

them could come over and congratulate me, it didn't feel like much of a victory.

I had just made it past the shed when I heard someone running to catch up to me. It was John, his face red with anger.

"How did you do it." He demanded.

I shrugged and turned away not feeling like gloating. Something must be wrong with me. He grabbed my shoulder and forced me to turn around.

"Luck." He spat at me. "You got lucky," He repeated loudly. I winced, here was that scene Millie had warned me about. Frantically I looked around to see his friends walking up and some others turn in our direction.

"John, don't do this" I said quietly, pleading with my eyes for him to let it go. He wouldn't though, and we both knew it.

"Don't

me what to do

" He screamed. People were definitely staring now, and moving closer.

I clenched my hands in frustration "Look John" I hissed quietly "I won fair and square."

He didn't take the hint to keep his voice down.

"You most definitely did not, it was

, and I

a rematch!"

Oh, no, he didn't really say that did he? Not in front of all these people. A crowd had formed by now. What should I do? I couldn't turn him down, not that he would let me anyway.

"Fine." I whispered.

"Tonight." He said, finally calming down now that I'd accepted. I nodded and walked away, the crowd parted to let me through. I could hear them all talking excitedly about our duel and shook my head, what was I going to do?

I paced back and forth down the hallway, I was mad, why did he have to go and cause a scene like that? Why couldn't he just swallow his pride and admit he was wrong, he

what he'd said to me last night was wrong. I'd seen it in his eye's that he regretted it so why couldn't he man up and say it? And now I had to fix it somehow. I was furious with myself; why didn't I listen to Millie? Why did I let him get to me? Why had I cared what he'd thought anyway?

And then I felt bad, why did I have to push him into this? I knew how he was. I should have known... but I didn't know he would feel so bad about losing, didn't think he'd let me see it if he did.

I punched my hands at the wall breathing heavily.

"Miss Celia... Are you alright?"

Millie. I turned to her and as soon as she saw my pained look she rushed to my side and gently led me into my room.

She sat me down on the bed, the same way we'd been this morning

"What is it... did you... lose?"

I groaned and dropped my face in my hands "No, I won, and you were right, he--he said it was luck, and then he demanded a rematch. In front of everyone."

She pulled me to her and stroked my hair softly.

"Now, now Lady, no sense being upset over what's done."

"I should have listened to you Millie, what should I do?" I said quietly.

"You do whatever you have to do Miss." She said firmly.

I was pacing again. It was getting dark out, and I'd stayed in my room all day trying to calm myself and not answering the door for anyone. But after all that time I was just as tense as I'd been before. I took a deep breath and walked outside heading to the practice courts, but I wasn't the only one.

This couldn't be good.

The closer I got to the field the louder it got. I walked around the shed and froze.

It was even worse than I thought.

It looked like half the castle had turned out for this. There were all the court ladies flirting with all the boys, some older knights and their wives, all the stable hands and a handful of other castle staff, everyone not on duty at the moment it looked like. I shakily walked into the shed. John was already in there. He looked pale and only nodded at me as he walked out, all his earlier confidence gone. I took a deep breath and picked up a sword at random. I had made my

decision, and finally having done so walked bravely out with determination to face John.

The crowd quieted down immediately once we stood facing each other. With a bow we began. I took up the offence this time driving him back a few feet before switching to defence. We circled each other exchanging blows and I made sure to set up my moves so that he would be able to block them without giving me an opening. This was a tense battle, I had to calculate every move carefully, keep it going long enough, remain calm and cool, and make sure no one caught on.

We had been going for a while, neither gaining the advantage but John was nervous again, making mistakes that I tried to cover up, this was a show more than anything. Frustrated, he stepped up so that our swords were locked together. I could see that he wasn't standing properly, while I was well braced. I could easily step aside and he would fumble, giving me the victory.

He seemed to realize this too and tried to correct his stance, which I let him do while I transferred my weight to the other leg. This was it, could I go through with it? With a deep breath I slackened my hold just slightly-- and he pushed forward causing me to stumble back. He had his sword placed just above my heart.

Game over.

I dropped my sword to the ground acknowledging defeat and made sure my face looked blank while the crowd cheered and began to surge forward. John stood still staring at me and panting hard before he was surrounded, while I slipped away unnoticed.

I walked into the shed and let out a deep breath. Millie would have been proud, but I grimaced knowing that John would never let me hear the end of this. Still, it had been necessary. My thoughts were interrupted when the doors opened and clicked shut again, the bolt sliding into place. What now? John came forward looking confused, how had he gotten away from the crowd?

"You let me win." It wasn't a question.

I made sure my expression was carefully blank again "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Save it, we both know I made a mistake, but you covered it up and let me win"

"I did no such thing," I replied, feigning anger. I turned away hoping he would believe me and drop it when he stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Why did you do it?" He whispered. I turned back around to see him looking down at the ground, and now I was angry for real.

"Because you didn't give me a choice!" I snapped.

He looked up confused, and a little hurt. "What do you mea--
"

"You couldn't just accept that you lost, you had to go make a big scene, say it was luck that I won, force me into a rematch in front of everyone!"

He winced at my harsh tone and took a step back, which just made me angrier.

"The whole bloody castle turned out for this after your spectacle, so what was I supposed to do? Beat you in front of everyone, the people you're going to be

one day. And what would they think if you

? They wouldn't have any respect for you, so I had to do it. Had to make sure you won without anyone being able to tell."

His eyes were wide, and the angished look so obvious in his eyes told me I should stop, but the words kept pouring out.

"I tried making you keep it down, asked you not to do this, but you didn't listen, so I had to clean up the mess, and you still have to ask

? You're old enough to be King, John, people expect you to set an

, did you not hear them out there? You

to win, but don't for a second think it was because you're a better swordsman than

!"

He was still standing in the same place, unable to look me in the eye and looking utterly defeated. It was a pathetic sight and I felt bad again for being the one to cause it, but it was too much, I'd gone through enough today. I stormed out from the back, both emotionally and physically drained.

The Last Dance (5)

Chapter 5 - Lessons

John's POV

I heard her slam the back door shut. Crap. She was right. She was a way better fighter than me. Hell, I never realized I was that bad before I fought her. But then again, I

the Prince, people probably let me win all the time. Except for her, she had never treated me any different. I ran my hands through my hair in frustration.

I turned around at the sound of the door opening. Maybe she came back?

No, it was only Luke and David. I felt a stab of disappointment, but what would it have mattered if she had come back? I'd probably only make it worse somehow. I sighed and waited for them to come up to me.

"Hey John, there you are, everyone was wondering where you disappeared off to," David laughed.

"Yeah, didn't feel like celebrating your big victory?" Luke said with a grin.

I looked down at the ground, feeling miserable.

"Come on guys, you know she let me win," I looked up to see them both exchanging a look.

Luke shifted from foot to foot "Look John--"

"You don't have to say anything, I know it's true, and anyway, we all saw her this morning, I didn't stand a chance. You guys have probably let me win too," I added quietly. It wasn't a question.

"Look John, we're sorry, it's just the Arm's Master..."

Were they really

to let me win?

I slumped down on a stool and dropped my head in my hands. This just keeps getting worse and worse.

I heard the guys kneel down beside me and felt someones hand on my shoulder.

"We felt bad about it, but I guess... the Arm's Master was just... afraid of what you'd do if you weren't the best."

I looked up, "So what you're saying... is that I'm a big screw up and everyone else has to fix it." I shook my head, "Cece was right."

"What? No, of course not"

"John, stop feeling sorry for yourself, it comes with the territory of being Prince" David said ruefully.

"Well maybe I don't want to be Prince, and have to deal with everything that comes with it" I whined.

"You're not that bad a swordsman John, its not like we go out of our way to let you win, and you have beaten us fairly before. It's just Cee's

good, a complete natural."

"Yeah, Cee could beat us all blindfolded, why do you think none of us fight her?" Luke said laughing.

"Exactly" David piped in "She's the best, no one ever wants to fight her, not unless they're ready to swallow their pride."

This made them both laugh, I only frowned, confused.

"Then... why would she let me win?"

"She just... didn't want to embarrass you."

"Yeah, but WHY? She's never cared about that before."

"Well, that's because it's usually just the two of you, but in front of everyone? Cee would never undermine your position in public, you have to know that."

"I never noticed"

David shook his head "You wouldn't, you're too busy giving her a hard time" He cuffed me over the head with a grin.

"Well she starts it"

"You sure about that?" Luke said with a raised brow "Think harder."

I frowned, was everyone against me? I mean... I did start things the night of her party... and I do always laugh at her when she's remotely girly... and that whole rematch idea was mine... plus I did confront her about letting me win just now... Shit.

They must have seen the realization on my face because they both turned to each other with a grin.

"What did we tell you? Maybe if you actually gave her half a chance..."

I cringed, they were right, she already despised me, now after today... I mean, we've always fought, thanks to me apparently, but it was never this serious.

"So, how should I fix it?"

"You know Cee, she'll cool off eventually."

"But... should I apologise or something?"

"You do whatever you think you have to." David said. And with a slap to my shoulder they got up and left. I sighed, I didn't really know what to do, could I really apologise? What if she laughed? Then I remembered her face, how angry she looked, and I winced. I had to do something.

I'd had a restless night and almost no sleep, but at least I'd finally thought of what to say to Cece. I got up and headed down to the mess hall, hoping to find her there alone. I stood in the doorway and surveyed the room, frowning. I didn't see her anywhere. A few people walked past me and bowed or congratulated me on my win yesterday. Great, as if I needed the reminder. Still not finding her I went up to my dad.

"Father, have you seen Cece this morning?"

"Why yes I ran into her a little while ago"

"And she hasn't come here? Do you know where I might find her?"

"Now let me see, I think she said something about going for an early morning ride"

A ride? Where would she go so early in the morning? She could be anywhere! Or wait, not just anywhere... and suddenly I knew exactly where to find her. With a smile of thanks I rushed out to saddle up Shadow hoping I remembered the way.

Here, this was the place. I gently pushed aside the branch that hid the opening, not wanting her to notice me right away. Yes! There she was, curled up under the willow tree with a book. She moved her hand to turn the page and something caught the light. I smiled, she was wearing my gift. Not that she knew it was from me. I still don't know why I even got it for her, I just remember looking through the market stalls and finding it in a cart that was otherwise filled with junk. A diamond in the rough it was, and I knew I had to buy it. Then I chickened out and couldn't even give it to her, leaving it in the room instead.

I shook my head, getting nervous. Suddenly I wasn't so sure if I could do this, she looked so peaceful, and I would probably just upset her again. I wasn't used to second guessing myself around Cece, but talking to David and Luke last night made me question everything.

I eased myself in anyway, not tripping over the branches this time, but she still looked up startled. Until she saw me that is, then she just huffed angirly and went back to her book.

Come on John, be a man, just walk over there.

Right, okay.

I went and stood in front of her shifting from foot to foot. She didn't even look up, oh man, I just forgot everything I was going to say... Is it too late to leave? She wouldn't mind I'm sure...no, no, I have to. I took a deep breath.

"Uh, hey... hi Cece" Her mouth tightened into a line. Oh right she didn't like when I called her that!

"Uh.. I mean.. Celia.. I just... uh.. I wanted to say..." Oh great, now she looks up. I blew out a breath and looked down, this was ridiculous.

"I'm sorry" I blurted out.

There, done.

I braced myself for the laughter. After a few moments of silence I looked up to see her giving me a puzzled look.

"You're apologizing?" She said slowly.

Great, now I had to explain.

"For yesterday I mean, and you're party, I shouldn't have said what I did, I guess I went a little overboard or maybe a lot. In fact I'm sure plenty of guys want to marry you, everyone likes you, my friends especially, and I mean I know you and David are pretty close..." Now, why did I say that? I'm such an idiot. I looked away embarrassed feeling my face flush.

I sneaked a glance back at her. She looked like she was trying to hide a smile. Wait... did that mean I had actually done something right?

"Why?" I gave her a puzzled look. "Why are you apologizing?' She clarified. Oh, that.

"Because, you were right" I said running my hands through my hair. I turned away, I couldn't say this facing her. "About everything. I'm an idiot, and a screw up and everyone else has to clean up after me, and I'm going to be a terrible King"

I finished quietly. Okay, I've said way too much, time to go, before I lose any more of my dignity, if I even had any to begin with.

I turned to leave and heard a heavy sigh behind me, and then she grabbed my wrist. I looked down and smiled seeing the bracelet.

"John, I didn't say that" She mumbled before letting go.

I looked around at her ruefully "But you know its true."

"Its not true." She said firmly, "And you better believe me because you'll probably never get me to admit it again." She gave me a half smile and turned around to get back to her book, but now for some reason I didn't really want to leave.

"I never thanked you for last night" She turned back to me and her look softened. Wow, I've never seen that before.

"I guess it's my turn to say sorry, I didn't mean to blow up on you like that"

"It's okay, I guess I deserved it" I noted with satisfaction she was trying not to smile again, I must be on a roll.

"Just a little." She admitted and turned around again.

"So I was wondering..." Crap, why did I keep calling her back? She was giving me a questioning look.

"I was wondering... if maybe... you could teach me?"

Now she looked downright startled.

"You want my help?"

"Yes?" I said it more as a question.

She looked at me suspiciously. Well nothing to lose now, I went up and took her hands in mine which caused another startled look. This was actually kind of fun. I looked down at her innocently.

"Pleeaseee" She was hesitating, I almost had her.

"Saying sorry and please all in one day, are you sure you're feeling alright John?" She asked dubiously.

I leaned down "Is that a yes?" I asked quietly, knowing she was going to say yes.

"Well... um.. I guess" She said hesitantly. Ha, I was right.

"Meet me at the stable at noon" She pulled out of my grasp and went back to her book. I pulled myself out of the clearing and turned back for one more glance before letting the branch fall into place. I smiled, she was playing with my bracelet.

Celia's POV

I was absently fiddling with my bracelet, thinking how... unexpected that had been. Why did he go all... nice on me? Was this some sort of trick?

Probably, and I'd gone and fallen for it. I sighed.

Why was knowing John so complicated? Something must be up, he's never apologized to me before, about anything. And asking for my help too, weird... And what was that last scene about anyway? Was he messing with me like I'd tried to do the last time we were here? I shook my head. It was hopeless, I couldn't make sense of anything, I'd just have to wait until noon to find out.

I walked to the stables warily, this would be interesting. John was already there and handed me a sword when I got there. Might as well get this over with, I thought.

"Right, so the first thing we need to work on is your footwork"

I scratched two lines into the ground and made him stand on them.

"Good, now move your right foot behind you, back on the line, then in front of you and repeat.

"Celia, I want help with my fighting, if I wanted to dance..."

I swung my sword down at his knees and he jumped back.

"You wanted my help, so you'll do as I say, and if I say you need to work on your footwork then that's what you'll do, got it?" I said tensely, I was on edge here, waiting for the catch, so it really surprised me when his face broke into a slight smile.

"Whatever you say Cee."

Did he just call me Cee? Strange, he always calls me Cece, I guess he finally caught on that I didn't like it. But now that he wasn't using it, I almost missed it.

Wait missed it? What was wrong with me? I shook my head and got back to the lesson.

"Make sure you practice that whenever you can, if one foot is moving the other should be planted on the ground or you'll lose your balance"

He nodded and kept practicing. Back, center, front, center.

"You also tend to lose your cool a lot when you're fighting and make silly mistakes. If you ever want to be any good you have to learn to control your emotions and stay calm. Inexperienced fighters always call out insults during a duel to get their opponents worked up. Ignore it."

After that we moved on to practicing blocks and thrusts, and I taught him a simple pattern dance to help the moves become more natural. By the time we stopped it was getting dark out.

"Alright, that's enough" I said with a sigh and flopped down on the ground. John walked over to the side of the stable and put his head under a wall pump. After shaking the water from his hair he came and sat down next to me with a smile.

I smiled hesitantly back, we'd actually managed to get along for a few hours, no arguments or anything.

"So, Cee," He said, nudging me playfully with his elbow, "How are

dancing skills?"

I frowned at him, "What are you talking about?"

"You know, for the High Ball, your 'big day'" He said with a wink.

Oh right that, I'd actually forgotten for a while. I looked away embarrassed, I would never hear the end of this one...

"Oh don't tell me." He said with a laugh "You can't dance?" I mumbled a shut up at him and punched him lightly on the shoulder.

"But you were dancing at your party weren't you?"

"Only with David" I mumbled "And he did all the work."

Before I knew what was happening he'd sprung up and grabbed my hand, pulling me to my feet.

"John, what are you..." He grabbed my free hand and placed it on his shoulder, then moved his free hand to my waist.

"What are you doing?" I said, trying to move away. He tightened his hold on my waist and pulled me closer. I was grateful that the dark was hiding my blush.

"I'm teaching you to dance obviously, what were you planning to do at the Ball?" He started moving and pulled me along reluctantly with him.

"John, this is embarrassing." I tried to squirm out of his hold, which only made him pull me even closer. There was less than an inch of space between us, I could actually

the heat coming from his body. Or it might have been from my burning face.

"And you think getting beaten by a girl isn't?" He murmured. "Be grateful none of your friends are here to see." I could hear the smile in his voice. He was enjoying this far too much, he must have known how mortified I was. I was afraid to look up, he was way too close.

"See? Not so hard is it? Only four easy steps."

"Where did you learn to dance anyway?" I said, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice. I didn't think I could take much more of this, it was too... intense... the exact opposite of what I was used to concerning John.

"Another of the perks of being Prince" he said sarcastically. "I had to learn, but then again, I didn't know I'd actually enjoy it..." He trailed off quietly.

That was it, I definitely could not take this anymore, I felt way too flustered and hot, I couldn't think straight, and all from John? I gently pulled away from him and he let me go with a sigh.

"Alright, who put you up to it?" I said warily.

"What are you talking about Cee?" He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, and truthfully, it felt like I had.

"I mean, this must have been a bet right?" I said furiously.

"A bet... what? Celia..."

"Someone put you up to this." I was shaking now, what was wrong with me? I was so confused.

"You couldn't... this was... you don't... you can't..." I shook my head feeling angry tears stinging my eyes and was grateful again for the darkness. It was too much, this was

we were talking about, and if he saw me now I'd never live down the humiliation. We weren't supposed to get along, it didn't make any sense.

"Celia..." he said softly reaching for my hand.

I jerked it away and his hand fell to his side. He looked hurt.

"I... I have to go" I said. I turned and started walking quickly away. After a few steps I stopped to look back, he was in the same spot I'd left him looking at the ground.

"Cece" I called out to him. He looked up at me confused. "Call me Cece," I said before turning back around running off.

What had happened tonight? I couldn't make sense of a thing, but it had to have been a joke right?

Deep down I knew it wasn't, not with how confused he'd looked, but I couldn't face whatever it was I had been feeling a few minutes ago. How had the mood changed so fast?

I shook the tears from my eyes feeling ridiculous and slammed the door shut to my room. I slid down the wall breathing hard. Never before had I felt so overwhelmed.

The Last Dance (6)

Comment and vote?

xo.

****

Chapter 6 - Confused

John's POV

What just happened?

We were actually getting along for a while there, and then... Did I say something? And how come she wants me to call her Cece again? After all the years she's gotten mad at me for calling her that, I finally listen and she changes her mind. And now she thinks I was being nice on a bet?

Alright, this confirms it. Celia is crazy.

Yup, I knew it all along, I mean really, I have

idea what just happened, but she's really not that bad... not that I would

tell her that.

I guess things

getting kind of intense...

But she didn't have to freak out like that.

Girls.

I sighed, no way I was figuring this out anytime soon.

"Prince Johnathan! Is that you?"

I turned to see one of the palace workers running towards me. Wasn't that Celia's friend? Mildrid, or something... was something wrong with her?

"Yes..."

"Millie, my Prince" She said with a curtsy.

"Ah yes, Millie, what is it, is Celia alright?"

"Celia, your Highness?" She looked at me in confusion.

I sighed "Sorry never mind, what was it you wanted?"

"Your parents, their Royal Highnesses, have asked to see you in the throne room"

Oh, it was just the parents. What would they want so late?

I thanked Millie and headed inside. The halls were empty of their usual bustle which was somewhat of a blessing, I wasn't particularly up to seeing anyone right now. Unless I was to run into Celia...

No, stop thinking of her, she's the one who ran out on you. Yes exactly, in fact, she should apologize for being such a... girl.

In fact, I should

an explanation, the least she could do is tell me why she's suddenly so upset. But being a girl I'm sure she'll expect me

to know what's wrong.

Ugh.

Girls.

As I reached the throne room two men walked out bowing to me on the way. I nodded to them and continued in to see my parents and Celia's father sitting around the fire place. They looked pretty relaxed so I assumed nothing bad was going on.

"Ah, John there you are, did you see those two gentlemen who just left here?"

"Yes Father, I did"

"They came here from Fief Newberry. It seems there have been some problems. Nothing serious of course, just some routine mediation"

"I see, and you're going to be gone for a few days?"

Why was he telling me he was leaving anyway?

"No son, you're going."

What did he just say? I must have heard wrong. "Sorry, I thought you said I would be going."

"You are. You're going to be King one day and this is the kind of thing you'll be expected to take care of, just think of this as field experience."

This was not good, definitely not good. I had to help people with their problems when I couldn't even sort out my own?

"You'll be leaving first thing in the morning with Sir Corry and Sir Roden."

First thing in the morning! That was too soon, I had to find Celia now, get this thing between us sorted out... not that there was anything between us. "Well, if that's all--"

"Actually, while you're here there is something else we've been meaning to talk to you about"

I could practically feel the tension in the room rise. My Father glanced nervously at my mother who nodded in encouragement. I'd never seen Father nervous before, what was going on? I suddenly felt a sense of foreboding. Even Celia's father seemed uncomfortable.

"Son, as you know the High Ball is coming up soon..."

"Yes, I know" Celia was being presented this year, I wonder what she'd look like in a gown now that she was all grown up... wait, snap out of it John.

"...And you're now already twenty-one..."

Where was this going?

"Sir Dimitri has brought to my attention some concerns of the council..."

What would the council have to do with me? Did they think I was unfit to be King? Because they would definitely be right...

"You see we've never encountered this problem before with other Monarchs... but you don't seem to get along with any of the court ladies..."

Wait... they couldn't be talking about...

My Father sighed. "Son, you need to get married"

No, they couldn't... "Father you can't mean an arranged marriage"

He looked surprised "Why no of course not, but you do have a deadline... the last night of the High Ball"

No, I couldn't, I wasn't ready. Sir Dimitri noticed my panicked expression and guided me gently to a seat. I buried my head in my hands. They couldn't do this, it wasn't fair, and how could I find someone by then? When all the girls' at court only tried getting close to me because of my position?

My Father came and put a hand on my shoulder, my mother's eyes were filled with tears. I buried my face in my hands, both angry and worried.

"Father how can I... I don't even know these girls...."

"Well, we thought perhaps, you might consider Celia? She's grown into a fine young woman."

I looked up startled to see a similar expression on Sir Dimitris face. Apparently he hadn't expected this either.

Marry Celia? She would hate me forever.

"Father, Celia and I... we..." She would be miserable, she hated me, and we couldn't even get through one day without falling apart. No I couldn't do that to her, and besides it's not like I even wanted to marry her, before today I couldn't stand her. I

can't... I think.

I looked over at her father, pleading with my eyes for him to understand. He smiled at me reassuringly.

"Jeoffrey, if I may, Celia looks up to you as a second father and she would not refuse you, however... she and the Prince have never seemed to... see eye to eye"

"Of course I understand" He looked sad as he turned to me "It was only a suggestion, of course the choice is up to you, but a choice must be made"

I couldn't speak, I only nodded. My parents gave me a look of sympathy before walking out of the room. I thought Sir Dimitri had followed them out when I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"You won't mention any of this to her will you Sir?"

"No Johnathan, I won't."

I nodded feeling relived.

"You didn't ask for this."

How did he know that's what I was thinking? I looked up at him "It's a lot of responsibility, sometimes it doesn't feel worth it."

"I know, you're Father felt the same way at your age. It isn't an easy path."

"He did? I didn't know that."

"He hid it well, your Father was a born leader."

"But I'm not."

"You are John, you just can't see it."

"My Father never had to deal with this though, he and Mother always loved each other."

"He and your Mother knew each other for a long time, the way you and Celia have."

"Only we don't get along at all."

He smiled at me "She doesn't make it easy."

"I don't help though," I muttered back.

He looked at me curiously and understanding filled his eyes "Ah, you're starting to care for her."

What? No I'm not, this was Cece we were talking about. The girl drove me nuts! I didn't care about her!

But after today... no.

She ran off on me, she obviously doesn't care so why should I?

"She would still never... we aren't even friends... can't even go two minutes without fighting... it isn't possible." I ended defiantly.

"Whatever you say" He smiled "Now Johnathan, I suggest you don't torment yourself further thinking of this tonight, you'll have to be ready to leave early tomorrow."

"Thank you Sir."

He nodded and left me alone with my thoughts. I was nothing like my Father, I REALLY didn't want this, I couldn't do this, be King, I couldn't... but how could I get out of it?

Celia's POV

I woke up late this morning, a first. I'm usually up before the sun, but not today. Today the sun was shining brightly in complete contrast to my mood. I felt terrible, guilty, confused...

I'd hardly gotten any sleep, I kept waking up ready to go find John and apologize before realizing I should wait until morning.

He probably thought I was crazy. I didn't blame him. A bet? What was I thinking? He actually tried to be decent to me for once in his life and I go and ruin it, and just when I was actually starting to enjoy his company...

That's it, I had to go find him, but where to look? Breakfast would be over by now. Would he be in the practice courts? No, not if he was avoiding me... but was he avoiding me? He might just be angry... I had to find him.

I was walking absently down the hall, not really paying attention when I ran into someone; a merchant from the city, and his wares went flying everywhere.

"Beg pard'n Miss, I weren't watching where I was going"

"Quite alright, I fear I was rather distracted myself" I shot him a smile and bent down to help him pick everything up.

"No need ta get ye clothes dirty Lady, I got it."

"Non-sense of course I'll help." He nodded at me gratefully and we continued picking up. He had an interesting collection here, fancy candles, beaded jewellery, and trinket boxes.

We'd just finished collecting the last of it and standing up when he caught sight of something that made him smile. I

looked around confused.

"What is it?" I asked him

"That... can I be seeing that bracelet yer wearing?"

"Oh, of course" I said surprised and pleased. I held my wrist out for him to see and his face lit up. He looked at me in admiration.

"So, yer the one eh? Who's got his Highnesses favor" He grinned widely.

What was he talking about? "Sorry, I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Now he looked surprised "Why yer bracelet, the Prince bought that from me he did, not a week afore."

No, it couldn't be, "Prince Johnathan bought this?"

"That 'e did Miss, 'n paid me mor'n its worth too, did ye not know?"

"No I just... didn't know he got it from you" I covered.

He nodded seeming satisfied. "Well then Miss, I best be off."

I felt dizzy, this couldn't be. I stumbled down the hall and, sitting heavily in a chair, buried my face in my hands. Why would he buy me something like this and not even leave a note? It wasn't like John to not take the credit for something like this. Right?

Unless he thought I wouldn't like it? Ridiculous, it was beautiful... but maybe he thought I wouldn't want it from him?

I just didn't understand, this was a few days ago now, when we still hated each other... this must have been the night I challenged him to that duel...

Of course, it makes sense, no one else had been in the room, and he came in right after me. I shook my head in confusion. Why? Why would he get me something at all, much less something like this...

I felt twice as bad now, I had to find him, but where to look? I couldn't waste a minute.

"Lady Celia, is that you?"

Millie! She would know where he was!

"Lady inside at this hour, what's the occasion?" She said with a laugh. Then she got close enough to see my face and ran up to me "Have you been crying my Lady, whatever is the matter?"

I hadn't even realized I was crying. How did he get to me so easily? "It's nothing Millie, I just need to find the Prince really badly, have you seen him?"

Her face fell. "My Lady... I'm afraid he's gone"

"Gone! What do you mean gone?"

"He had to go off to Fief Newberry on business for the crown."

"I don't understand."

"His Highness the King wanted him to gain some experience ruling."

"But... when did he leave?"

"Early this morning Lady" She must have noticed my expression because she continued reassuringly "Now now, the fief isn't far away, only a day and half's ride, and I'm sure his business won't take long, why he should be back before the week is out."

"A whole week?" That was too long! I couldn't wait that long... but I had to. I'm such a fool, how could I have let him leave with things the way they were. He must hate me all over again. I buried my head in my hands with a groan. If only I had woken up at my usual time I might have caught him...

"If I may ask my Lady, why do you so urgently need the Prince?"

"I... I hardly know myself Millie, I don't know what to say, or why I feel the need to say anything, I just know I need to, and now it's too late"

She looked at me confused. Obviously I wasn't making any sense. "Miss Celia, if you don't mind my saying, you've seemed rather emotional since your birthday, perhaps a trip away from the castle would help to clear your mind."

"That would be great Millie, but where would I go?"

"Well, why not visit your sister Anna? I'm sure she'd be happy to see you, and you could spend some time with the twins"

Of course! Anna could help me, she'd know what to do. "Oh Millie that's perfect! Thank you!" I gave her a tight hug. Anna was only a day's ride away, I could talk to her and still be back before John. But still, a whole week?

The Last Dance (7)

Hey, so the timline might be a little confusing but basically everytime the POV changes, time has passed.

Comment and Vote?

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Chapter 7 - Thinking

Celia's POV

"Aunt Cee!!" Maria and Chloe ran up and threw their hands around me. I smiled, being away from the castle was just what I needed.

Annabelle was close behind, she laughed when she saw me buried under the twins.

"Girls! Behave, why don't you two take Coriolis into the stable?"

"Horsy!"

"Come on pony!"

"To stable hurrah!"

"Giddiupp!"

They ran off towards the back of the property with the Fief's attendants running to help. I smiled and embraced Anna.

"The kids are so big!"

"They're quite the handful, they remind me of you when you were young"

"Hey! There was only one of me, and I was no trouble at all"

"No, only when you were with John, and then there

two of you, and

the trouble" She laughed at the memory. I shifted and laughed nervously.

She looked at me knowingly, Anna could always tell when something was up, especially something involving John.

"What did he do?"

"Actually... it's umm... more something I did," I finished quietly.

She looked at me curiously while I turned red under her gaze.

"So you came here to get away from him?"

"Not exactly, he left early this morning to go to Fief Newberry."

"I'm guessing there's more to this story."

"There is... but can we... maybe talk about it later... like in the evening?" I wasn't quite as ready as I thought.

She nodded and waved at me to follow her.

We spent the rest of the day keeping busy, we rode to a nearby village to pick up supplies and just sat around inside catching up and chasing after the twins. The afternoon was

spent helping teach some of the local children to ride horses.

Before I knew it the day was over and Anna and I were settling down with cups of cider before a hearth fire. We sat quietly for a while before Anna finally broke the silence.

"Alright Cee, tell me what's going on"

John's POV

I hadn't been able to find Cece before we left. I had gotten up early and looked everywhere, the practice courts, the mess hall, even her place in the woods, but she wasn't anywhere. She's always up before the sun so it was pretty obvious she was avoiding me, but why?

"Johnathan, see that horizon up ahead? That's the Redwood Forest, we should be upon it in about an hour and stop there for the night."

I nodded "Thank you Sir Corry"

The knights were friendly and we had gotten along well and eased into a sort of friendship early on. Once the business of discussing the problems at Newberry were out of the way we had talked about our lives until breaking for lunch and I had finally gotten them to stop calling me 'My Prince'.

After lunch we had saddled up again and lapsed into a comfortable silence and my thoughts had turned to Celia.

I couldn't figure out why she would have avoided me. At first I was hurt but the longer I thought about it the more angry I got. She had no right to be mad at me, I hadn't done anything wrong! I mean the least she could do was face me, but no, she just ran away.

I thought she was braver than that.

Forget it, she wasn't even worth it, no wonder we've always hated each other, that's just the way it's supposed to be.

I had calmed myself down by getting distracted by the surroundings. We were close to the line of trees now and they stretched ahead of us and to the west as far as I could see. It was a stark contrast to the road we had traveled on until now which was flat and only lightly vegetated.

Finally we left the main road for the first line of trees. I dismounted and looked around.

"Beautiful isn't she?" I turned around startled, I hadn't heard Sir Roden coming up.

"The forest?"

"Of course, nothing beats sleeping under the trees with the stars peeking through, if I do say so myself"

I smiled, this forest looked much larger than the one by the castle, but I had never spent the night outdoors before. "Anything I can do to help set up camp?"

He grinned at me "Yes, come along then, the basics of setting up camp are something everyone should know"

He and Sir Corry showed me how to find and clean water, build a fire and pitch a tent. We gathered up our bags and hung them from a tree.

Though we had brought our own food, Sir Corry taught me how to set up an animal snare for catching small game. It was a crash course that I worked hard at to learn as much as I could. Finally it was time to retire for the night.

"Does one of us need to stay up as guard?" I asked Sir Roden.

"That won't be necessary tonight, the Forest goes right up to the edge of town and as such is fairly clear of bandits and the like. We're perfectly safe as long as we stay at the edge."

"But not deeper in?"

"The forest runs between the road on this side and the Newberry River on the far west. You tend to get people living along or near the water, and you never can be too sure whether they mean you harm or not so it's best to stay clear. But as long as they leave the village folks alone we let them be"

Interesting, so it was possible to live in the forest...

I set my sleeping roll outside alongside the tent so I could enjoy the cool night breeze. Sir Roden was right, there really was nothing like this. I smiled to myself, and started drifting off to sleep.

Celia's POV

"Alright well, it all started on my birthday..."

Her eyes filled with understanding "Let me guess, the High Ball?"

I nodded "His parents gave me a beautiful gown for it and John brought up the last time I tried wearing a dress."

She grimaced "That sounds like John alright."

"Anyway, we got in a big fight, bigger than we ever have and I... uh... challenged him to a duel."

"You did what? Celia!" Her eyes were wide with shock and amusement "Well I hope you at least beat him."

I smiled guiltily "Well yes, but that just made it worse. He made this huge scene and demanded a rematch and the

castle turned out..."

She cringed "Oh no, you beat him in front of everyone?"

"Of course not, I... let him win."

"That can't have been easy Cee, but I'm proud of you."

I smiled gratefully "Thanks, but I'm afraid that's not all."

"Oh, go ahead then"

"Well, I tried really hard to make it look like he won fairly but afterward he followed me and called me on it, and I got really mad and yelled at him and left."

"Well, isn't that the way it always goes between you two?"

"Yes, but then the next day... he came and apologized."

Her eyes widened "That is certainly different"

"I know, I thought it was some kind of trick, but he looked like he meant it, and then he asked for my

with swordplay" I could feel the shock radiating from her face but I had to finish "So I agreed and, it was the weirdest thing Anna, we actually got along, we were having fun and making each other laugh, and things were going so good,

and I just... panicked. I started getting confused and... flustered"

I could feel my face heating up and looked resolutely away from Anna. "And then I accused him of being nice on a

and got completely hysterical and ran off. He even stopped calling me Cece,

, and you know what I did? I actually

him to keep calling me Cece" I could feel the tears stinging my eyes, only barely managing to keep them from falling. "And he got me this beautiful bracelet" I held my wrist out for her to see. "And I didn't even

it was from him, he just left it somewhere for me to find, if the merchant he bought it from hadn't seen it, I don't even know if he would have told me. When I tried to find him to apologize that morning he was already gone" I buried my face in my hands. I felt better about getting it all out but just thinking back to everything that had gone on the last few days made me feel ashamed and embarrassed.

After a few moments I looked up and was shocked. Anna had an amused spark in her eyes and was trying to hold back a smile.

"Anna! Who's side are you on!?"

"I'm sorry Cee, but listen to what you just said, John was going out of his way to be nice, got you a birthday present, and here

are feeling bad about the way you treated him, can't you see what's going on?"

"Not at all, you've completely lost me." I thought back over the last few days, and yesterday, trying to figure out what she meant.

Nothing.

"You mean you don't know?" She asked in disbelief.

"Well of course not, that's why I came to you," I whined.

She shook her head at me, "Oh no, I can't tell you, this is something you need to see for yourself"

"See what? You're the big sister you're supposed to tell me" I pouted.

"I can't Cee, and I'm sure deep down you know what I'm talking about, you just can't admit it to yourself"

"Fine! I don't need your help anyway" She tried to come over and comfort me but I stepped to the side and huffed out. I knew I was being childish but I couldn't help it, I felt betrayed. How could she not help me when I really needed her?

***

I woke up feeling no less confused and angry than I had the night before. Walking out behind the manor I went through the hardest training patterns I could to work off my frustration.

I swiped up in a blur of motion. How could Anna refuse to help me?

I swung my blade down and up. This was all John's fault, if he had just left me alone to cool off like usual I wouldn't be

in this position.

I crouched low and flung the sword out in an arc. Why did I keep over-reacting? First John and now Anna. I just kept pushing away the people I cared about!

With a jerk of surprise I sent my sword flying to bury itself in a tree trunk not far off. Pushing away people I cared about?

Did that mean I actually cared about John?

John's POV

"Welcome to Newberry, Prince Johnathan"

I looked down from the top of the hill to see the village spread out before me in the bright afternoon light. There were children running around on the streets laughing and sparing with sticks. Linens were hanging from strings between houses, and market stalls lined the center square.

I stood there trying to take it all in; the castle town was nothing like this! Our village was more a place of commerce then socializing. The only children around were the kids training to be knights, and very few people owned houses in the village.

The Knights laughed at my wide eyed expression but I just couldn't stop looking. And the smells, you could smell the dust being kicked up from the road, soap from washing, freshly baking breads, and spices from the market stalls.

"Life is different outside the castle" Sir Corry said voicing my thoughts.

Sir Roden grinned and swung his arm out to take in the view. "This is what your Kingdom really looks like."

After gawking for another moment we started down the hill into town. I was immediately relieved that I choose to only bring plain cotton garments with me rather than the finer clothes I usually had to wear around the castle, I stuck out as it was.

People obviously knew who I was and stared at me without hesitation trying to seize me up. I returned their looks with a nod or smile but their expressions stayed neutral making me feel nervous. Children moved out of the way of the horses and pointed at me excitedly. Our path was clear except for two kids who stood in the middle of the square arguing.

"Girl's aint allowed to play with swords" A young boy yelled.

The girl crossed her arms defiantly "Just watch me, I'm gonna be better than

!" She retorted.

"No you won't girls can't fight, you'll never beat me."

"Yes I will!"

They started swinging their sticks at each other, completely unaware of their audience. Two women, who must have been their mothers hovered nearby trying to get them to stop and looking at me anxiously. The kids reminded me someone... of course, how many times had Celia and I had that same argument?

I covered up a smile, remembering I was mad at her and swung down off my horse. The women looked alarmed and embarrassed while the Knights raised their eyebrows at me, but didn't interfere. I walked up to the kids and cleared my

throat. They looked up and simultaneously dropped their sticks.

"We didn't mean n-nothing." The boy stammered.

"It was all Caleb's fault!" The girl pleaded.

"No it's not! Lizzie started it."

The turned to face each other and began arguing whose fault it was.

I shook my head and laughed which caught their attention as they looked back at me embarrassed.

"Caleb says girls can't fight."

"You would never be good anyway." Caleb muttered.

I turned to the girl, Lizzie. "You know, my.. uh... friend... at the castle is a girl, and she can fight."

I turned to Caleb, "She's better than most of the boys too."

Lizzie beamed and stuck her tongue out at Caleb.

His eyes widened "No way, a

beat the boys?"

I leaned in and whispered "I'll let you in on a secret, she even beat me"

His mouth dropped open in shock and Lizzie looked between us in confusion. I grinned at him and winked "If I were you I wouldn't get on her bad side."

He turned to Lizzie "Okay, you can fight."

"I never asked you if I could anyway."

He grinned "Want me to help you?"

Her face lit up "Okay!"

They picked up their sticks and ran off. Wow, I wish it was that easy between me and Cece.

The two kids' mother's came up to thank me and after that more villagers ventured forward to say hello or ask a question.

Sir Roden rode up and the crowd dispersed looking a lot friendlier towards me.

"Good move Johnathan, very diplomatic."

I looked at him in surprise. "I wasn't trying... I mean I just wanted to help."

"Well good," Sir Corry said riding up "Because that's what you're here to do."

Celia's POV

I had spent most of the morning outside hoping the fresh air would clear my head. I hadn't really gotten anywhere on the John situation though. We'd had too many years of bad blood, that couldn't just change overnight could it?

And yet that didn't explain why I felt the need to see him and fix things. Maybe it was just our present 'situation' that had me all confused. I'm sure once I apologized and cleared the air I'd go back to hating him, and he would go back to being an annoying jerk.

Good, let's go with that. This was only temporary insanity.

Exactly.

I bet that's it.

I made it back to the manor just as the sun started to set and sat under the tree my sword was still stuck in; I hadn't bothered to pull it out yet.

I was leaning back against the trunk when Charlie came out the back and started walking towards me.

"Hello Celia." He smiled brightly at me. I stood up and he noticed the sword sticking out of the tree. Looking surprised he grabbed onto the handle and tried pulling it out.

It didn't move an inch.

He looked at it curiously, like it was a puzzle and tried pulling it out again jerking it up and down. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I smiled and stepped forward; holding firmly onto the handle, I pulled it out in one smooth motion.

"How did you do that?"

I shrugged. "It's all in the way you pull it out."

He looked at the trunk and back at the sword in my hands, which I was now twirling around, and laughed. "I'll just have to take your word for it."

I smiled at him. He was so easy to like, Anna was lucky.

We started walking around the grounds in a comfortable silence.

"I think I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"So soon?"

I nodded "Tell Anna I'm not mad at her."

"I think she'd prefer to hear that from you."

"I know but... she was right, I need to do this on my own, and if I see her again... I might not be able to."

He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder and waited until I looked up to meet his eyes. "You've grown into a fine young woman Cee." He said proudly.

I was touched.

"Thanks Charlie"

He nodded "I'll have Coriolis saddled up for you tomorrow, and I'm sure the girls will want to see you off."

He nodded at me once more and headed inside. I felt better than I had all day and I couldn't wait to be back at the castle. As much as I loved it here, it just wasn't home.

The Last Dance (8)

Comment and Vote?

xo.

****

Chapter 8 - Lost

John's POV

I woke up exhausted, the town meeting had gone on for hours last night. There were forms to sign and people to meet, arguments to resolve and plans to oversee. It was all a blur, and today I would be going through it all over again.

My day was booked by the minute.

I would be spending most of my morning riding through town and meeting the locals. From the few who'd talked to me yesterday I knew what it was going to be like. They would start out making small talk, and discussing their lives and children, but once they got comfortable around me they would start bringing up every petty problem they could think of and expect me to reciprocate with wise and thoughtful advice.

They seemed to expect I knew everything.

Hardly.

I had barely been outside the castle growing up. Sure, I knew about the history of the Kingdom, and its geography, but what did I know about day to day village life? Before

coming on this trip with the Knights I'd never even spent the night outdoors.

I knew about the merchants routes and what the selling prices of various goods should be but I didn't know how they started their business or where they farmed their agriculture.

I realized my experience in the real world was extremely limited. Of course I'd learned the rudiments of being a knight, I'd done the same training that Sir Corry and Sir Roden had, but with many adjustments. Training masters went easy on me, never wanting to correct my stance or improve my aim. I had to work twice as hard to be at the level of everyone else, and with little guidance at that. I never got to do any of the fieldwork either.

Being in this situation now, and realizing how handicapped I was made me resent the restrictions I had been put under growing up. And the worst part was that people seemed to be in awe of me, of being a Prince.

I'd be happy to give it to them, if only I could.

Look at them, with their happy families and loved ones. And here I was with a marriage expiration date looming up.

I allowed myself only a sigh of frustration. I couldn't afford to show how upset I was. Another of my many perks, I thought bitterly.

The afternoon would be even worse. I would have to preside over cases brought to the court. I was more of a figurehead than anything with no real decision making power. It would be hours of sitting in an uncomfortable chair and listening to confessions and false accusations. At least I didn't decide the fate of the guilty, but would I be able to sit there and

support it if the punishment didn't fit the crime. And would people hate me for not stepping up in their defence?

Celia's POV

It felt great to be back.

I had left the Fief early this morning with a cheery farewell to Charlie and the twins and arrived back only moments ago in the late afternoon. I nipped into the mess hall from the workers doors to grab a plate of food and ate in the kitchen. No one expected me back for another few hours and I didn't feel like announcing my presence just yet.

I took my time walking the grounds until I couldn't hold off my arrival any longer.

Going inside I headed towards my parent's chambers and spent the requisite amount of time telling them about my journey and filling them in about the twins and Anna. Afterward I left to find the Queen and repeated my news for her. She told me the King was expecting me and had just left to go see if I had returned.

I quickly navigated the halls to catch up with him. "Uncle!"

He turned around beaming "Celia, I trust you enjoyed your trip?"

"I certainly did Uncle" I said embracing the King. He began walking down the hall and motioned for me to follow. I fell in step with him as we passed by living quarters and he nodded to various residents.

Eventually our path led outside to the courtyard behind the castle.

"The castle feels empty without John around." He commented.

I laughed "You mean without our constant arguing?"

He smiled ruefully at me. "You two never did get along did you? John always was a stubborn one, never knows when to throw in the towel."

"Well, it wasn't just his fault, it takes two to argue," I said with an embarrassed laugh.

He nodded and we continued on in silence for another few minutes. "I wanted to thank you for what you did for him."

"What do you mean?" I asked confused.

He looked at me with a twinkle in his eyes "I have it on good authority that you let him win a certain duel not long ago."

"Oh! I.. uh..." I could feel my face flushing. Think fast, think fast...

He didn't give me a chance to explain. "You always understood how important image was for him even if he didn't."

I only nodded, not trusting myself with words.

"I wonder... do you think..."

I looked at him, confused at his hesitation.

"I worry about Johnathan, and I know he doesn't want it but... do you think he'll make a good King?"

I stopped startled. I definitely had not seen that one coming. "Well, don't tell him I said this, but I think he'll be great"

He smiled relieved. "You do?"

"Yes, I mean,

may not get along, but I've seen how he treats those below him; the palace workers, the merchants, and even the young pages. He's always kind and respectful to them, and they like and respect him in turn. He may not always know how to behave, or lose control of his emotions, but those are things you can learn." I said confidently.

I looked back at the King to see him watching me with admiration, though I couldn't figure out why. When he noticed me looking he smiled "Of course you're right, I never had any reason to doubt"

He started to leave, then turned around and opened his mouth to say something, but only shook his head and continued to leave. I headed off to my room wondering what he'd meant to say.

***

I spent the next two days in the practice courts. As each hour passed I became more worried about seeing John again and worked off my anxiety in the field. I became more and more uncertain about what I would say to him.

Finally the day arrived of his return. After pacing restlessly in my room and spending more time outside I was called in by Millie and wandered over to the reception room.

The King and Queen were there as well as my father. After a few tense minutes there was a knock on the door and two knights walked in.

"Sir Roden, Sir Corry, I hope your journey went well?" The King asked, forever polite.

The Knights exchanged a look and shifted nervously causing worry lines to crease the faces of everyone present.

"Well you see, about that..." Sir Roden began before the King held up his hand.

"It's alright gentlemen, the debriefing can wait until my son joins us."

The Knights exchanged another look and Sir Corry spoke up. "Well Sire, that's just the thing, he uhh... isn't with us"

The King looked puzzled, not understanding what the rest of us immediately knew. "I don't understand what you're saying, where is he?"

"We.. uhh.. lost him"

The Last Dance (9)

Comment and Vote?

****

Chapter 9 - Looking

"What do you mean lost?" The King asked with barely contained anger. My Father and I exchanged a look, this false calm was a bad sign, it would have been better if he'd just yelled.

The Knights seemed to come to the same conclusion and started speaking at once to explain.

"We didn't mean--"

"Never would have guessed--"

"--he seemed--"

"--second day"

"The Forest--"

The King put his hand up grimly. "Sir Roden?" He asked coolly.

The Knight took a deep breath and fidgeted before speaking. "It happened on our first night outside the village. He seemed perfectly fine and excited to be coming home but in the morning he was gone. There was no sign of a struggle and all his bags were gone as well as his horse and

some of our supplies. We think... in fact we're certain he... ran away," Sir Roden finished hesitantly.

There was silence following the announcement as we all waited for the Kings response.

"I see," He finally said. "And you did nothing?"

"By no means Sire, we scouted the Redwood Forest, and asked a trusted worker to discretely send a few men to look for him, but he left no obvious signs of passage and must have had several hours lead. We did all we could without notifying the village and causing alarm..." Sir Corry explained.

The Kings look of anger was immediately replaced with a grimace. He slumped into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

This action startled us all but my Father and the Queen rushed to his side while I remained forgotten.

"You may go." His voice came out thick with grief and the Knights, looking extremely saddened headed towards the doors. "Tell no one..."

They nodded and left us alone.

"My son... my own son ran away" The King shook his head with grief while the Queen let tears silently run down her face. My Father did his best to comfort them with whispered words of comfort. I felt awkward standing there and wished there was something I could do to help. I was too angry to feel upset. The idiot. Didn't he ever think? Didn't he know what he was putting his parents through?

It was pathetic and cowardly.

After a few minutes, which seemed like hours, the King managed to compose himself and addressed the problem.

"We'll just have to send out a search party" He declared.

"Jeoffrey, do you think that's the best idea? If word gets out that the realms Prince is missing... what will the people do?"

"Do? I don't care Dimitri! My son ran away, what do you expect me to do, sit tight and hope he comes back on his own?"

I was a little stunned. My Father and the King had been friends all their lives and I had never seen him lose his temper like that before, especially at my Father.

"I know you're afraid Jeoffrey," He said quietly, "But causing panic and worry isn't going to help the situation, we have to go about this rationally."

A single tear slid down the King's face. All at once he seemed to deflate as all the fight went out of him. "You're right of course, I'm sorry. What do you propose we do then?"

My Father began pacing around the room thinking about it. I was still standing by the fire, forgotten, taking it all in.

"Well, first of all, we have to get word out that John is spending some extra time away from the castle, getting some experience in the field, and then we send one, maybe two people out to find him and bring him home"

The King shook his head. "You're right about telling everyone his trip has been extended, but you know how stubborn John is. Even if he wanted to come home, he wouldn't if we tried to force him. Sending any of our men to bring him back is pointless."

"Then we'll just have to send someone else"

"Like who?"

"Me." The word burst out before my mind even registered it, but I knew it had to be me all the same.

Everyone looked in my direction startled and confused. "I'll go after him," I clarified.

The King looked thoughtful, thinking it over, but my Father addressed me first. "You? But Celia, it's dangerous out there, and to go after him alone?" He reasoned.

It would have been easy to back out, but the more I thought about it the more sense it made, I just had to convince my Father of it.

"Father" I said in my diplomatic voice, "I've had more training in the field than John has and I'm better in arms than men several years my senior. Besides, I know John, I can get him home and make him think it was his idea in the first place." I was only half sure about that. We might just end up fighting and make things even worse, but someone had to try.

He looked at me worriedly but I could see him wavering.

"She has a point Dimitri."

"And if anyone notices I'm gone you can say I've gone to Anna's." I quickly supplied, heading off the objection before he could even bring it up.

He sighed and I knew I'd won.

"Fine you can go, you'll be leaving in the morning, I'll have everything you need ready." And with that he swept out of the room. I knew this was hard for him, and I felt bad, but someone had to go after that fool.

"Thank you for your generous offer Celia, I know you'll bring him home safe." The King smiled gratefully at me and I was pleased that he was so confident that I could get his son back home. Now all I had to do was live up to it.

John's POV

I had done it.

And no one had suspected a thing. I felt bad leaving the Knight's like that after all they'd done for me, but I didn't have a choice.

I couldn't be King, I just couldn't. I was doing the Kingdom a favour by running away. Right, I just had to keep telling myself that.

I was surprised at how flawlessly things had gone. I'd casually asked around for information about Redwood Forest and people had happily obliged thinking nothing of my curiosity.

I now knew there were no dangerous animals in the forest to worry about, and the vagabonds who lived there were probably harmless, but of course it would be better not to run into them.

My biggest risk was being recognized, but I'd done what I could to take care of that too. I had bought some coarser garments from town, and gotten hold of rags to put over Shadow's expensive tack. And once my beard started to

grow out over the next few days I felt confident that I would be unrecognizable to any but those close to me.

What could go wrong?

Celia's POV

I left early the next morning and rode hard. I knew that when it came to tracking every second counted, especially in the forest when any minute something could cover up or disturb signs of passage. I also had a speed advantage over the Knights because they had been carrying a lot more and stopped to eat along the way. By nightfall I should reach Newberry, and then the real search could begin.

John's POV

This lighting a fire business wasn't as easy as it looked.

Sir Roden had gotten our fire started in seconds, but I couldn't seem to get one spark off the flint.

I threw the stones aside frustrated. At least I'd found a good place to stay the night. It was fairly sheltered and there was room for Shadow to graze nearby. I'd found a small stream that I assumed was an offshoot from the main river. Of course I didn't want to be too close to it, just in case anyone else happened upon it.

I looked around restlessly; I'd already hung most of my belongings and food in the trees, set up a latrine, and was now bored. There wasn't much to do in a forest was there? If only someone had thought to warn me about the boredom... with a sigh I picked up flint and stone again and crouched by the twigs.

Here goes round two...

Celia's POV

I reached Newberry just as the gates were closing for the night and the guardsmen pointed me in the direction of the closest inn.

After paying for a room I headed to the dining area and picked a table in a shaded corner to listen to the cavern talk.

"An I told him 'e aint wanna be goin' in there, what with 'em wildy-men a'runnin 'bout. Bu' 'e said 'Don't they all live around the river' and I says we'll surely they do but it's the one that don't what gets ya"

"Bought some flint off me he did. I said to myself, now what would a Prince 'o-mine be wanting with that? Them folk aint used to rubbing two stones together I reckon but I say good for him. That there's no idle boy whats gonna take the Throne"

It seemed the town was still riled up about John's visit because that seemed to be the only topic for conversation tonight. I felt a pang of worry thinking about him alone out there. What did he know about living out in a forest?

He brought it upon himself, the idiot. All the same I wish I could set out this minute to go find him, but I knew that would only get me lost, and then where would we be?

It looked like he was on his own for tonight.

John's POV

I finally got that damn fire started. And just when it was getting too dark to see. I was relieved that I had found the right kindling so there would be no smoke to give me away.

That would show everyone. I wasn't some helpless Prince, I could take care of myself just fine!

I dragged my pallet close to the fire and curled up under a blanket. See I could do this.

...

It sure is quiet out here.

...

Except for those... crickets? I think I could do without that noise...

...

What was that sound? I sat up in a panic.

Oh, just the wind causing the branches to creak, nothing to worry about.

...

I laid back down slowly. Couldn't I handle just one night alone out here? What a stupid idea. Cece would be calling me all kinds of idiot right now.

If she even knew I was gone yet.

If she even cared...

I suddenly wished I hadn't left things the way they were, so what if it wasn't my fault? I should have forced an explanation from her anyway.

Never mind, who knows if I'll ever see her again. Good riddance. Exactly. I didn't need some girl complicating my

life. That's what my Father never understood. I couldn't just get married on the spot. No way.

I needed to do this, there was no other choice.

I tossed about for a few more minutes and looked up at the stars.

They did wonders to clear my mind. It was a reassurance to see something familiar. Those were the same stars she'd be looking at tonight I thought as I finally drifted off to sleep.

Celia's POV

I started out first thing in the morning before anyone else in the inn was up. Tracing my path back the way I came I did a sweep of the tree line looking for where the Knights had set up their camp a few nights before.

There, the scattered remains of a fire.

I dismounted from a distance and tied Coriolis to a nearby tree so that my tracks wouldn't spoil the older ones. Kneeling down next to the ashes I surveyed the surroundings with a careful eye.

I saw where the foliage was bent from passage and pushed aside branches to see the ground. I ran my hand over the soil, feeling patches of loosly turned dirt that contrasted the firmly packed ground around it. Surely a sign of recent tracks being covered.

I smiled to myself; let the hunt begin.

I had to search on foot and lead Coriolis along from a distance so it was slow going. I had to admit, John had done a pretty good job of hiding his tracks, and I only had little

hints to help me along the way. He walked over rocks and moss whenever he could and it would often take me several minutes to pick up the trail on the other side.

I looked tensely up at the sky, it didn't look like I'd be finding him tonight. Soon it would be too dark to follow the trail. With a sigh I ripped off a piece of the rags I'd gotten from the town and tied it to a branch as a trail marker. With that done I pulled Coriolis in the opposite direction to a large oak tree we'd passed earlier. Tying him up I threw down a pallet and quickly lit a fire hoping he'd be okay alone for one more night.

John's POV

Day two.

I had managed to get a handle on working with the flint and it had only taken a few minutes for me to get the fire started last night. I grinned. In a few days I'd be like one of the natives. The sounds of the night hadn't even bothered me that much, so I guessed I was making progress.

I walked around restlessly. There was just nothing to do out here. The sheer boredom alone would drive me out. I picked up my sword and started working through the pattern moves Celia had shown me during our lesson. I practiced them whenever I had a few minutes to spare and by now they came naturally to me. I didn't even have to think about them anymore, my body just moved from one stance to the next. And, though it pained me to say it, she had been right about my footwork. Now that I balanced my weight properly I could feel more power behind my swings and had much better control over my weapon.

I practiced for a while before calling it quits. There was only so much you could do without an opponent. The sun had

moved significantly into the sky, it must have been around midday. Great, only the rest of the day to go. And still no concrete plan of action. I couldn't stay in this damn forest forever.

I idled about checking over my food stores and fresh water supplies, did some physical training without a weapon, and even climbed a few trees to see where I was relative to the village, River, and main road.

What now?

The sun had gone down beyond the trees now but I could tell it would still be several hours before nightfall.

There's got to be something to do out here. People live here don't they? But not alone I realized. They had company to wile away the hours.

I was leaning back against a tree when the snap of a twig caught my attention. I scanned around looking for the source of the noise and wondered if I had imagined it when a shadow began stepping out of the trees. I scrambled up and grabbed hold of my sword while the figure edged forward.

Wait... was that? No it couldn't be...

I rubbed my eyes. I must be hallucinating. The person's lips tugged up into a smug smile.

It couldn't be... and yet it was.

The Last Dance (10)

Hey, so there might not be any more of John's POV for a while. You'll just have to figure out what John's feeling as Celia does!

Comment and Vote?

Enjoy,

xo.

****

Chapter 10 - Found

Celia's POV

I crossed my arms and smirked at his shocked expression.

His arm hung limply by his side with his sword clutched loosely. He looked different, rougher. He was wearing plain clothes and his hair looked all tousled and slept in. He also had the beginnings of a beard growing in that framed his lips and made him look mature. There was no denying that living out in the forest agreed with him. I was relieved that he seemed to be doing okay for himself. This was a good spot he'd picked out.

He was still looking at me with a dazed expression and blinked a few times as if I might be a trick of the light.

I raised an eyebrow at him and all of a sudden his features became unreadable. I was startled at the change and

wondered what had brought it on. Just as fast his lips turned down into a sneer and his eyes narrowed at me.

"What are

doing here?"

I was shocked at the coldness of his words and unconsciously took a step back. Where had that come from? Confused and flustered I opened my mouth to reply but found that no sound came out.

"I--I uhh..." He rolled his eyes at me and I felt my face coloring slightly. I quickly rearranged my face into what I hoped was a teasing smile. "I came to get you of course"

He obviously didn't hear the lilt in my voice, or if he did chose to ignore it. The already annoyed look on his face turned full on hostile and I found myself taking another step back feeling completely baffled.

"Well you wasted your time, I'm not going anywhere, and especially not with you"

I flinched at his tone. He must have seen the hurt written all over my face because his expression softened, but only for the briefest second, before it was replaced by a mask of arrogant indifference.

I was immediately furious with myself for acting so weak in front of him. He didn't have the right to get to me, not after what I'd gone through to find him. I hardened my expression and shot him a withering glare.

"Fine, stay out here alone, let's see how long you last" I snapped at him. If anything got to him out here, it would be the lack of company.

I whirled away before he had the chance to say anything and stalked off into the trees the way I had come.

With each step my anger melted away, but I couldn't put a name to the emotion that replaced it. Guilt? Hurt? Confusion?

Maybe some of each and more, or maybe I was just overwhelmed. I was exhausted from the search and lack of sleep.

It wasn't what I expected. I didn't know what would happen when I found him, whether he'd be glad or even relived to see me, if I'd apologise or brush over the our last night together like it never happened. Either way, I was way off.

I suppose in a small way it was what I wanted. I though once we got over our awkwardness things would go back to the way they had been before. And isn't that what just happened? Only I had stupidly been expecting something different; something more. Only I had no idea what exactly.

I guess it didn't matter now though anyway. I pushed through the last of the undergrowth and stepped over to Coriolis. She rubbed her head up against me as if sensing my tension. I let out a shaky laugh and started petting her mane soothingly.

My hands were shaking. With a sigh I buried my face in the saddle blanket. A shuddering breath later I closed my eyes against the rough fabric and felt tears staining my cheeks.

Was I back to this already?

***

Once I'd collected myself I looked up and realized with a start that more time had passed then I'd thought. It was already getting dark out and I hadn't done anything about my arrangements for the night.

Feeling numb I let my body work automatically to set up and light a fire. I quickly removed my packs from Coriolis and bundled everything up tightly in a brown piece of canvas that I strung up into a tree. I pulled the saddle blanket off of Coriolis and dragged my pallet over to the horses' side.

I prayed for a dreamless sleep and curled up under the stars, which tonight gave me no comfort. I pulled the blanket over my head as if it could shield me from the world and my stupid idea to come out here in the first place. Maybe tomorrow I would wake up in my own room, never having gone out on this fool's mission.

***

"BOO!"

I shot up with a gasp and my heart beating at three times its normal rate. I flailed about for my sword in a panic and felt like an idiot for being so ill prepared out in the Forest. My frantic movements only succeeded in tangling me up in the blanket and I cursed myself again wondering why I was still alive and drawing breaths.

Calm down, I needed to calm down. I took deep breaths while thinking frantically of a plan. It was only then that I heard muffled sounds from nearby.

As my heart beat erratically I scanned the clearing and my eyes landed on a crumpled heap on the ground. Was that John?

My heart skipped a beat before I realized he was still moving.

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding when I noticed he was shaking... with... laughter?

He was laughing?

My foggy mind began to clear as realization hit me and I instantly felt my blood boil.

"What is

with you." I spoke quietly and menacingly, putting as much venom as I could muster into each word, and they seemed to do the trick.

He stopped mid laugh and picked himself up off the ground trying to keep a straight face. When he looked over and saw the icy glare I was shooting him he looked momentarily surprised. His eyes then took in the rest of the picture and he bent over clutching his stomach as another round of laughter broke forth.

I looked down and realized I was still sitting in a tangled mess and glared at the blanket as if it was the cause of undermining my intimidation. Furiously I threw it off and stood up. Pulling my sword out in one smooth motion I took two strides over to him and slammed it halfway into the ground.

That got his attention.

"What is

with you" I screamed again.

He flinched back but quickly recovered and smirked at me.

"Not a morning person are we?" He teased.

I glared daggers at him and could feel my face heating up with suppressed rage. His smirk faltered and was replaced with a look of annoyance.

"Jeez Celia, it was just a joke," He said condescendingly.

"A joke?" I echoed in disbelief.

He opened his mouth for what I'm sure was a snarky reply, but I didn't give him a chance to deliver it. I pulled my sword out of the ground and levelled it to right between his eyes before he could even register the movement.

He started going cross-eyed keeping the point in sight and finally decided to take me seriously. He closed his eyes and I let out a sound of frustration before moving the point away from his face and throwing it as hard as I could behind him.

He heard the whistle of air as it passed by his ear and turned around to see it embedded into a nearby tree. He slowly looked back at me, fear written clearly all over his face and took a few steps back.

"Everything's a joke to you isn't it?" I asked coldly. "You don't even think! You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself. You're a selfish, pathetic, COWARD! "

His face flushed with anger and he opened his mouth to contradict me, but I wasn't about to give him the chance.

I could feel the rage building inside of me, could feel the words burning their way up my throat and spilling out like a

rush of hot lava, and boy did I ever plan to leave a path of destruction in my wake.

"Do you even

what you put everyone through? Your parents were blindsided, but you didn't even think of them did you? Didn't think how this would affect them? To have their damned worthless son run away without a thought. You weren't there to see that crushed look on their faces, or how grief stricken they were. No, as usual someone else had to be there to pick up the pieces of

mess! "

His defences crumbled as I raged on and he hung his head lower and lower, but never once broke eye contact. Emotions passed like rapid fire through his eyes; pain, anger, fear, hurt, guilt, surprise, confusion; and others that passed too quickly for me to identify.

"And do you know what I went through to get here, how many hours I spent on my hands and knees on the ground trying to follow your path. How worried I was that I would somehow have to explain to your parents that their idiot son had gotten attacked by some crazed animal or

! And I'll bet you didn't think about the Kingdom, what kind of mess that would cause. We had to hide it from everyone that you were missing. But you didn't care about that either. No, you decided to run off and have a little adventure." I ended in disgust.

I took a moment to catch my breath, fully ready to launch back into my accusations when his eyes flashed in annoyance.

"Don't stand there and

me Celia, you don't even know why I left. Damn it! I didn't just wake up and walk away I had my reasons!" He yelled.

"Or really, and what, pray tell, would they be," I said sarcastically.

"I can't do this, I can't be King! I don't know the first thing about it and I've supposedly been being prepared for it my whole life. Well guess what? I don't feel prepared, I just spent a week in a town where everything was new to me, and I was as ignorant as a child. There's a whole Kingdom around me and I haven't seen any of it, I don't know how my own people live. I've had this ridiculous sheltered life where I don't know the land, the people, how punishment is doled out, where training masters lie to me about my skill and make everyone else lie too, where I have a deadline to get married and wasn't taught the first damn thing about living out in a Forest. In one night with the Knights I learned more about survival than my whole life in the castle. In one training session with you I learned more about control and discipline in fighting than all my years of practice. In one day at the town I saw how people really lived."

I gave him a disgusted look. "Do you even hear yourself John? Not everything is about you! And don't think I don't know how coddled you've been all your life. But do you know what the beauty of being King is? You can change all that. Everyone else, the village folk you seem to envy so much? They can't do a thing about the lot they were dealt, but

can. If you didn't like the way you had to grow up then do something about it, because unlike most you actually have the power to. You can get laws rewritten, you can make new

traditions, make it so that your kids and future Kings aren't limited the way you've been. You have no idea how much you have, and you want to throw it all away!"

I had been pacing back and forth, too disgusted to look at him, but when I finally did he only had a blank and bewildered look on his face. This was hopeless. All of a sudden the fight went out of me. What was the point to all of this of it just bounced right off? He didn't care, didn't even understand.

As the realization hit me my anger dissipated as fast as it had come and I shook my head and gave him a crooked sarcastic half smile.

"You know what?" I said softly "Forget it. I won't try to change your mind, or even drag you back. I'm moving camp tonight so you won't have to worry about running into me, and I won't come looking for you. You're on your own. Just like you wanted."

I expected him to turn around and leave, smirk, something. But he just stood there looking at me strangely. I started feeling uncomfortable under his gaze and after a few moments wandered off through the trees. I wasn't worried about getting lost, it was only a matter of looking out for distinctive features to keep track of my path. Hopefully when I got back he would be gone.

***

After an hour had gone by I headed back to my clearing and was relieved that he had left. I walked over to the tree I had thrown my sword in figuring I shouldn't be without it out here.

I stared at the trunk in confusion. I was sure this was the right tree, but there was nothing here. I scanned left and right but didn't see a protruding hilt anywhere. It shouldn't have been easy to miss.

Had someone taken it? The thought made me instantly tense and I walked back to Coriolis casually while glancing quickly around me. Nothing seemed out of place.

I was just about to start worrying when I noticed some things did look different. The fire had been built up and there was a fresh pile of branches nearby. My saddle blanket was sitting folded neatly next to Coriolis, and... there right beside it was my scabbard with the sword tucked in.

Had John done all this? Why would he? Especially after all I'd said to him. And yet it seemed the only logical explanation. How had he managed to get my sword out of the tree in the first place? Well, that was something.

Feeling the exhaustion from the last few days catch up to me I pulled a book from my saddlebag. I hoped it would do the trick and get today's argument out of my mind. I sighed and settled back against a tree, pulling the blanket over my knees.

***

I stopped reading when the sun dipped below the trees and got up with a sigh. I had to get moving and find another place before it got dark out. Collecting everything from the ground I threw it all half hazardly into a bundle and tied it to the saddle. Stomping out the fire I scattered the ashes and pulled my bags down from the trees. I took one last look around to make sure everything looked the way I had found it and started thinking about which direction to go.

The sounds of rustling leaves broke me from my trance. I blinked in surprise as John stumbled out of the trees tugging Shadow's reins and trying to tie his bags onto the saddle at the same time. I stared at him uncertainly until he got everything under control and looked over at me. For a fleeting second he looked embarrassed, but then crossed his arms and stared at me defiantly.

What was he doing exactly? I considered asking but was too tired to get into it right now so I just rolled my eyes at him and turned away.

I jumped up on Coriolis and headed into the woods without looking back; if he wanted to come along he had better keep up. We rode in silence until it started to get visibly darker, and I looked for a place to stop for the night.

I knew we'd been riding parallel to the Newberry River so I cut west into the dense trees until we hit it. We trotted on for a while longer before I found a suitably sheltered area for us to dismount.

Wordlessly John began collecting rocks and branches to build up a fire pit. I removed the packs and watered the horses, then tied them carefully to a tree where they could graze. We moved around each other silently and it struck me how seamlessly we worked; neither of us trying to do the same job or get in each others' way.

My gaze kept wandering over to John, and every now and then I'd catch him looking at me with a glimmer of pain or sadness in his eyes that disappeared quickly when he noticed me, and was replaced with his mask of indifference.

I vaguely wondered how long we could keep up the silent treatment and who would be the first to breach it. I knew I'd said things to him I shouldn't have but I

originally come out here to help him, not goad him. He just always manages to provoke me, even when I came with the best of intentions.

Even if I had wanted to say something my pride wouldn't let me. It was a show of weakness I couldn't afford again; I was sick of being made vulnerable by him.

I pulled my pallet over by the fire and flopped down on it with my book. Any distraction would be welcome right now. I felt a pair of eyes on me and, glancing up, noticed that John was looking at me with a bemused expression.

Knowing it was childish but not caring I stuck my tongue out at him and was surprised when he tried to hide a smile. That was not the reaction I was expecting.

He dropped his pallet down on the opposite side of the fire and wandered off into the woods. The idiot didn't even take his sword with him. I was debating whether or not it was worth breaking the battle of silence to call him back for it when I heard an unmistakable yelp of surprise from the direction he had just gone.

The Last Dance (11)

Hey, soo this chapter originally had some problems that people pointed out and I tried to change it but im still not sure if it works. If anyone notices a problem feel free to let me know, and if you have any suggestions on how to fix it that would be greatly appreciated =)

Comment and Vote?

Enjoy,

xo.

****

Chapter 11 - Caught

Celia's POV

I leapt up and checked to make sure my sword was ready. As much as I wanted to tear down the trees in my haste to get to him, I knew it would be foolish to run blindly into a bad situation. I couldn't help him if I got myself caught.

I walked silently and kept a look-out for branches and twigs that might give away my location. Peering around a wide trunk I saw John caught up in a net and hanging suspended from a tree.

My heart skipped a beat and I looked around worriedly for the men who'd laid the trap, but no one was there.

Was this some sort of set up?

I doubted it, but I didn't want to take any chances. I crept around from tree to tree, staying away from any exposed area while he flailed around miserably. While skirting the edges of the clearing I noticed him glancing in the direction of our camp. He opened his mouth only to close it again without uttering a sound.

Was he too proud to call me for help? Or did he think I wouldn't come...

Well he was downright stupid if he thought the latter. Of course I would come.

Always.

I realized how foolish I was being taking all this caution when it was clear no one was about to spring out from the bushes. With one more glance I confirmed we were alone and crossed the last bit of space between us. His eyes widened when he saw me and filled with relief, but again the blank face followed close behind.

"John, thank goodness you're okay." I clutched the net tightly and looked down with a shudder, trying to ignore the fact that he probably didn't want me here.

"How could you leave without anything to protect yourself? What would I have done if something had happened!?" I shook the net to emphasize my point, but I was too relieved for it to come out angry.

I hadn't realized until just now how worried I'd been. He pushed his hand out of the net and brushed it against my cheek. It came away wet. I turned my head embarrassed; I hadn't realized I was that upset.

"It's okay, I'm fine really, just a little uncomfortable," He joked.

I looked up to see him smiling ruefully; the first real show of emotion I'd gotten from him besides anger. I punched his shoulder lightly causing the net to rock and eliciting a chuckle from him. A few more tears slipped out and I rubbed them roughly away.

"You're an idiot." I said softly.

"I know... I'm sorry I worried you..." He said gently, his face coloring slightly.

I nodded and took a deep breath to calm myself. In that moment of silence I heard the snap of a branch from far off.

My eyes widened in panic before I pulled my sword out to cut through the net.

"Wait!" He whisper yelled at me.

I looked up at him in confusion.

"You can't cut me out, or you'll give us away"

"And getting caught won't give us away?" I whispered back in exasperation, listening for anymore sound.

He shook his head at me patiently. "If you help me they'll know there are two of us and come looking. One captured man is hardly a threat, especially when it's me," He said with a good natured shrug.

"And then you'll have the element of surprise to help me."

"So I'm just supposed to leave you here for them to find and do goodness know what with?" My voice came out shrill with

panic and I shook my head frantically.

No way.

No way in hell.

"You have to hide until they're gone and get rid of the horses, erase any trace of the camp, I'll be fine, and they won't even recognize me," He reasoned.

"Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you here!" I stomped my foot to emphasize the point.

He looked at me in wonder, like he was seeing me for the first time. After a moment he blinked and tried reasoning with me again. "You need to do this. Like you said, it's not all about me, trust me, I know what I'm doing."

I could see a look of determination set on his face.

"John this is ridiculous, we can just ride back to the village before they even get here."

"It's too far away Cece, and we're not familiar with these woods, especially in the dark, unlike the natives who would know every tree and leaf in this forest. Not even mentioning the horses who would have enough trouble moving through the foliage without carrying us and--"

We were broken off by another branch snapping, this time closer, and the sound of swearing from not too far off.

"I'll get you out of this, I promise."

He smiled at me again, the second genuine one I'd ever seen, and only in the last few minutes. "I know you will."

With that, I looked around for a suitable hiding place, but saw nothing with potential. And besides, I would need to keep track of where they went

pulling him free.

Think Celia!

Then it dawned on me.

Of course, so simple.

No one thinks to look above them in a forest.

I smiled as my thoughts came back to me. I could climb a tree. Perfect.

Now I just needed the right one. It had to be sturdy enough to hold my weight and have enough foliage to cover me.

There.

An elm stood on the opposite side of the clearing from where John was tied up. That would make an excellent lookout point.

I treaded my way around the trees carefully so as not to make a sound. I walked around the tree trying to see the best way up. This would be a challenge alright; I was no fan of heights, although I could handle them. And I would have to for John's sake.

The only problem would be all the noise.

I looked over at John frantically, pointed up at the tree. He immediately understood and began thrashing around in the net, creating a great deal of noise; just the cover I would need to get up the tree.

I knew I had to move fast, since his noise would bring the men along all the faster.

After finding a decent path up and calculating the distance to the first branch, I jumped and caught it with my hands. So far so good.

Taking a deep breath I hoisted myself up until I could swing my leg over. There. I looked up and saw another branch directly above me, but I would have to stand up to reach it.

Putting my arms around the trunk I shifted my body until I had my feet under me and slowly stood up. Once straitened, I reached up and barely managed to wrap my fingers around the next branch. The branches had looked much closer together from the ground, I thought bitterly.

I gritted my teeth and pulled myself up again. I continued the pattern working my way quickly upward. My worry made me forget all about the distance I was putting between myself and the ground, with all my thoughts concentrating on getting high enough. I had to this for him, in a way it was my fault he was in this mess. I was the one who had left him in the clearing and he only followed me, though I still don't know why.

Within minutes I had proper coverage. I turned my gaze back to the clearing. I was right; this was the perfect place to be.

John was still busy struggling in the net, making a commotion when the rustling of leaves and quiet chatter snapped my attention to the left; the opposite direction from where our camp had been.

As I watched, a man stepped out of the trees, followed by two more that bumped into him as he stopped suddenly.

They looked around in confusion before their gazes landed on the tree and John, now silent, suspended from it.

I tensed up, this was it.

John stared at them as they approached and I shifted my position to keep everyone in sight.

"Well, well, well, wadda we have here?" Said the first guy, who I assumed was the leader of the group. He was tall with cropped black hair and sallow skin.

John was fully alert and I was impressed to see that there was no fear in his voice when he spoke.

"I'm from the village, sir, and lost my way. I was trying to get home again when I stumbled into this trap of yours"

He had pitched his voice up from its usual deep baritone which would have been a good move if he'd remembered not to speak in his usual cultured manner.

The men exchanged looks and their leader raised an eyebrow, not buying it for a minute. I closed my eyes for a moment to keep from leaping down right now.

"Well ed-e-cated for a village boy aint ye?" He said with a smirk.

I saw the realization dawn on his face, but it passed quickly and he replied after only a moment's hesitation.

"My father sent me for a pages' training when I was of age, so I learned to read and write, but I couldn't handle it, so I came back"

They looked at him carefully trying to detect the lie. I grinned, impressed again. What he'd said was close enough to the truth that it didn't come out as a hastily made up lie. But these men didn't trust so easily and I knew the questions weren't done yet.

"If yer actually from the village then you should be knowin' better 'n to go runnin' off into this here woods"

Again he thought for a moment before answering, not letting the tense situation force him into a costly mistake.

"My parents kept treating me like a kid. I wanted to prove I would be just fine on my own"

"Well, tis a good thing they aint here to see ye now in this pre-dic-i-ment now eh?" He let out a hearty chuckle which his men quickly took up.

My shoulders sagged in relief. He'd managed to get his way out of any immediate trouble, and kept his identity a secret too.

The three men retreated out of hearing distance and put their heads together. They must have been discussing what to do with him because they turned back frequently as if trying to decide whether he was any real threat or not. While they conferred I saw John's gaze flicker to where I was hidden. He smiled faintly before looking away again so my position wouldn't be given away.

He began struggling with something and I scrunched my eyes in confusion wondering what he was up to. Luckily his fidgeting didn't catch their attention and I saw him drop something under the net casually.

I strained my eyes to see what it might be and caught a faint glint of something in the dirt. I hoped they wouldn't notice it as they walked over, their decision made.

"Alright boy, we're gonna let ye down from there, bu' for now yer coming wit' us, hear? Can't take no chances"

John only nodded.

They cut him down with a quick swipe and he landed unceremoniously on the ground. He picked himself up and was about to brush himself off, but seemed to think better of it. Instead he slouched over and walked with an exaggerated gait. I covered my mouth with a hand to keep from giggling. He certainly knew how to put on a show, I'd give him that.

Wordlessly the leader of the group walked up to him and pulled out a rope. He pulled John's hands to the front and tied them together around the wrists.

"Now here's how tis gonna work. We aint gonna hurt ye bu' we can't let ye see the way to our camp see. So's we gonna haf-ta blindfold you bu' don't be a-feared, ol' Jer aint gonna let ye fall. We of the wildy keep our word hear?"

A man, presumably 'Jer', walked over to John and showed him a strip of cloth which he then put over his eyes and tied securely. He then waved his fingers in front of John's face to make sure nothing could be seen.

Seemingly satisfied he took a firm grip of John's forearm and starting walking into the trees after the other two men who'd already disappeared.

At the edge of the trees I saw John stumble and pitch forward slightly, his hands automatically trying to reach out

to catch himself even though they were tied up.

His captor steadied him and told him to walk carefully, but I cocked my head to the side. I knew he wasn't that clumsy...

Ah, there.

I saw another glint at the line of trees where the men had disappeared and chuckled quietly.

So the stumble had been deliberate.

A distraction so he could leave me a trail marker.

Smart.

Maybe I'd underestimated him all this time. He was certainly thinking ahead trying to leave me a path to follow.

The Last Dance (12)

Comment and Vote?

Enjoy,

xo.

****

Chapter 12 - Plan B

Celia's POV

I waited a few more minutes to climb down so there would be no chance of the men hearing my noisy descent.

I looked down too quickly and felt a moment of dizziness. I swallowed deeply a few times to get my emotions under control.

If John could fool those men and find a way to lead me to him I could certainly climb down a tree.

I took a deep breath and slid my gaze down the trunk only far enough to see the closest branch.

Going down was the hard part.

There were always those few moments of free fall as you dropped from your branch to land on the next one. I swallowed my fear and began going down.

I reached the bottom fairly quickly and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

My skin felt clammy and I felt unsteady on the ground.

I was tempted to sit for a moment and rest, but I didn't want to fall too far behind.

There would be time to rest later.

***

I made my way to the camp and looked around thinking about what needed to be done. Our bags could stay up in the trees if I camouflaged them better; maybe tie them higher up. People rarely thought to look above them when walking through a forest.

The big question was what to do with the horses... They wouldn't exactly be easy to hide...

After removing all signs of the camp, I decided to take the horses back to the village. It seemed like the smartest course of action since I didn't know how long it would take to rescue John. The village was half a day's ride away by horse and the return trip would be even longer on foot, but I had no choice. There was no way I could follow John with two horses in tow and not be caught.

At least it was already dark out, meaning that John's captors would probably only go far enough to make a camp for the night. I planned to use every minute of my time to get to the village and back; I couldn't afford to let them get too far ahead.

Putting Shadow on a lead I kept on steadily through the night, having only the light of the moon to light my way. I could hardly make out the trees before me and all the landmarks that had been so obvious during the day were nothing but shadows now. I glanced up at the stars, my only

way to orient myself in the dark and hoped against anything that I was going in the right direction. I couldn't afford any mistakes now.

I lost track of the time and could feel the horses tiring under the relentless pace, but I couldn't stop. The slow journey chafed at me taking so much longer than I expected, but I had to keep going; in this race every second counted.

***

I had seen the moon rising steadily as I rode, and it was just now beginning to travel back down as my weary steps finally brought me to the edge of town.

Now what? I looked around me from the cover of the trees and saw the town deserted below me. How was I supposed to find someone to help me in the dead of night?

Keeping to the edge of the forest I made my way towards the city gates where I was sure sentries would be posted.

As luck would have it I saw a familiar face as I approached, at least I was pretty sure it was...

I quickly dropped the reins over a branch and walked into the glare of the torch light and the man standing there.

"What's this? What brings a Lady out so late in the night?" He asked kindly.

"Excuse me Sir, but might I be addressing Sir Corry of Newberry?"

"Why yes dear, and whom do I have the honour of speaking too?"

"We met at the castle good Sir."

His face crunched up in thought and I saw when realization hit him.

"Ah yes, you were the young girl awaiting the Prince's arrival when we brought the news. What are you doing so far from home? And at this hour no less?"

"I came after him of course."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Did you? And how goes the search?" He asked with genuine concern.

"There's been a... temporary setback."

His eyes crinkled to a look of worry. "Is there anything I can do to be of assistance?"

"There is actually. I need someone to look after a pair of horses for me, if you would be so kind."

"A pair of horses you say? Yes, I think I have just the stable for them. And I assume discretion will be required?"

I nodded in relief.

"Very well. Now where are these horses?"

"Just over there." I said pointing to the line of trees.

"I'll take care of them then, and you go off and take care of your own business" He said sensing my urgency.

"Thank you!" I curtsied before realizing I wasn't wearing a gown and gave him a sheepish smile when he hid a smile.

I think I liked this Knight.

With another round of thanks I walked briskly into the forest and only broke into a run when I was safely out of sight.

***

I ran as fast as my tired body would take me, aware that every minute brought me closer to the Prince. I kept as straight a path as I could; the trees passing me by in a blur. I had to stop a few hours later, drawing ragged breathes as I looked up into the sky. The sun must be just starting to rise, and though it wasn't yet visible above the tress, the sky was coloured with a pale pink light.

I supported myself against a tree to catch my breath, but not moving sent me into a panic so I stumbled along in a brisk walk allowing my breathing to come back to normal. I mourned the loss of a night's sleep that would have helped make this task more bearable. When I could breathe again I reluctantly broke into a jog, going only slow enough to trace my path along the familiar landmarks. Each one I saw heartened me a little more and finally, just as the sun rose to its greatest height signalling afternoon, I reached our old clearing and began to walk slowly, listening for the sound of movement or voices.

There was only silence.

Creeping up to the edge of the trees I noticed that it was still as empty as I had left it the night before.

The midday sun caught on something on the ground and I remembered how John had dropped something on the ground.

I walked under where the net had been and bent low to the ground, laughing when I found what he'd left behind.

It was a shiny brass button.

***

I wound my way carefully through the trees, stopping often to look for any signs of passage, and collecting buttons along the way.

It was an easy path to follow, but only if you knew what to look for. The brass color blended into the surroundings, but would cast of a spark of light if you saw it at just the right angle for the sun to bounce off of.

My main concerns were that John would either run out of buttons to drop along the way, or it would get too dark out for me to find them.

The path wound around in curves and circles in many places, sometimes even doubling back on itself, but went steadily further away from the village and ran roughly parallel to the river.

After a few hours of this tracking I reached a set of three buttons in the ground. I assumed it meant I was now close to the camp.

I marvelled again at his planning and now strained my ears for any hint of noise. They must be around here somewhere...

There, a chuckle from my left.

I edged slowly in that direction as the sounds became more distinct.

They must have felt pretty safe here, and been confident of their 'hiding spot' to make such a commotion. As I got closer

the sounds resolved into friendly banter, laughter, and the occasional swear.

I was grateful for the approaching dark helping to conceal my presence and knew I would need to find somewhere to lie low for a while. Climbing a tree, while my best option, wasn't a possibility. Besides the noise and time it would take me to get up there, I would have to pick one far away from the clearing and might not have a good enough view. Besides, I didn't know what would happen at any given moment and might need to act fast. Being high up in a tree would not be a good thing if that were the case.

I settled for a place across the camp site where two trees were growing close together. There was also a tall bush between the two that would provide some protection during the day, and some room below it that I could roll under if I had to. I hoped it wouldn't come to that though, or those thorns would be downright uncomfortable.

I squatted down restlessly.

I was not a wait-in-the-bushes kind of girl.

I looked around the clearing until I saw with relief that John was leaning back against a tree. His hands were still tied, and from the looks of it, his legs were bound as well, but otherwise he seemed to be unharmed and in fact, appeared to be asleep.

Figures.

Only he could fall asleep under these conditions.

The boy didn't get stressed out about anything. Except being King... I suppose compared to that this was nothing to

him. I rolled my eyes and smiled to myself glad I had managed to find him.

The three men who'd led him here were sitting a few feet away around a fire, and one other man had joined them.

Nothing interesting happened while I waited. Men came and went, disappearing off into the trees and coming back sometimes empty handed and other times carry bundles of supplies. Where did they get them from?

It occurred to me there must be other groups scattered around out here and they must trade among themselves. There was a makeshift village set up right here in the forest.

Amazing.

It was so dark now that I could only keep track of the men from their silhouettes cast by the fire. One more man had arrived by this time and I was getting anxious. That meant there were now five of them to two of us, and one was tied up. We were seriously at a disadvantage here and I didn't like the odds if I had to step in and do something.

The men finally settled down and went to sleep. I waited for a few hours before risking any movement and slowly made my way around the camp. I squinted around keeping track of my steps. The last thing I needed was to snap a twig.

When I made it around to John I could hear him taking deep, even breaths. I hope he was a light sleeper.

I moved my hand around to cover his mouth tightly to muffle any involuntary sounds. His body tensed immediately, but he didn't make a sound. I leaned down close to his ear and whispered quietly. "It's me."

His muscles relaxed and I felt his lips curl up into a smile under my hand. I quickly removed it and settled down beside him.

"I guess you found me okay," He said and gave me a nudge.

I chuckled quietly "I don't know how many times you had to fake a stumble to leave me a trail," I shook my head even though he couldn't see it, "But I have to admit it was a brilliant idea."

He stayed silent, but I knew he appreciated the compliment.

"So... how are you holding up?"

"It could be worse I suppose, they're not a bad sort," He murmured.

"Have they questioned you anymore?"

"Only for my name, which I said was Robert."

"Fake name, clever. Anyway, what's the plan for getting out of here?"

He sighed "Well, I came up with two ideas. Plan A is that they let me go. They still seem to be deciding what to do with me, but they want to wait for two more men before making any decisions."

"I see, and what about Plan B?"

He mumbled something I couldn't hear.

"What was that?"

"That... you help me?" He asked it as a question.

I couldn't help but feel a bit hurt. Did he still doubt I would help him? After coming all this way?

He seemed to take my silence as a no.

"I understand," He said quietly, "It's my mess, you shouldn't have to clean it up again, but don't worry, I'm sure I can talk my way out of this," He said with faked nonchalance.

I reached over and squeezed his hands with mine "I'll always help you John. Always. Don't you ever

doubt that" I said firmly. I hope he didn't hear the wobble in my voice.

I felt his eyes on me and once again felt like he was seeing me for the first time. He shifted around and closed the space between us so that his right side was pressed against my left. I blushed feeling the heat from his body and was grateful for the dark.

His shoulder leaned into mine and I felt his breath against my ear. "Thank you," He whispered.

Not trusting my voice I only nodded, knowing that even if he couldn't see it, he would feel the motion from how close we were sitting.

We sat like that for a while when it occurred to me that the enemy was only a few feet away, and I was sitting right here in the open. Granted, it was too dark to see, but I shouldn't be taking chances. With a sigh I started to get up when John stopped me with a whispered "Wait."

I turned back to face him.

"Will you… umm… stay until I fall asleep?" He asked nervously. I felt the shock pass over my face and was glad again for the dark. I bit my lip, not wanting to refuse but knowing it was dangerous to stay here any longer. Even as I thought this my body settled back against the tree, and the agreement left my lips before I even registered the words.

"Of course"

His muscled relaxed against me some more and I heard his breathing get steadily slower and even.

This was new.

Having him depend on me.

And willingly at that… But maybe he was only trying to make up for the coldness from before.

Yes, I'm sure that's all it is, though the thought made me feel surprisingly disappointed…

He must be asleep by now.

With a sigh I gently slipped out of contact, missing the weight against my shoulder. I shook my head. Focus Celia, tomorrow's going to be a long day.

***

I woke up feeling tired and sore from my restless sleep last night just as the camp began to stir. Men were getting up and stretching, poking up the fire, and making their usual forest jaunts. I watched tensely for the two men John said were expected and hoped they would show up soon.

They untied John's hands and gave him some food, which I took to be a good sign.

I had learned the names of all the men so far from their conversations last night. Besides Jer, the one who had led John, the man who I'd taken to be the leader was called Cal, and the third man who'd been there was Jory. One of the newer men who was small and squirrely looking was called Mason, and finally, there was Brice, a tall scowling man with severe features. He was the one that most worried me.

While the rest of the men did look relatively good natured as John had said, this one didn't seem like one to give up a captive without a fight. I could only hope that he wouldn't go against Cal if he opted to let him go.

If it came to a fight I would be hard pressed. As good as I was, even I couldn't take on five fully grown men with two more still to come. Perhaps I could make some kind of bargain? Or maybe just a distraction would do so John could get away.

Of course, knowing John he would be difficult and suddenly decide it wasn't chivalrous to leave me behind. He

have an attack of conscious only then, at the worst possible moment. I rolled my eyes at the thought. Besides, John was blindfolded on his way here, he wouldn't have the first idea where to go, and even though I knew roughly which way to go we would be no match for locals. There were too many things that could go wrong.

Just then two men stumbled out of the trees looking travel worn and exhausted. They were greeted enthusiastically and relieved of their heavy packs. The man in front looked questioningly at John and whispered conversation broke out

with many hand gestures towards the captive, who was now tied up again.

The second man was blocked from my view and I strained to see him so I could figure out how much of a threat he would be.

Finally the first man moved and the second came into view.

I squinted to see him better. He was short and had a frazzled, but kind look about him. He seemed familiar to me and I tried to place him. Was he someone from the village? Or from the Inn I had stayed at? He looked toward John and I followed his gaze to see that John was pale and looked about to be sick.

Odd, he had been fine just moments ago.

I looked back towards the man and suddenly realization hit, I knew where I'd seen him before. His eyes widened as he continued to take in John and recognition lit his face.

My blood ran cold.

The Last Dance (13)

Comment and Vote?

Enjoy,

xo.

****

Chapter 13 - The Price of Freedom

It was the merchant from the castle. The one John had bought the bracelet from and had then seen it on me.

Crap crap CRAP! What was I going to do? The facade John had created was useless. We were found out. Well, one of at least. That meant it was up to me to figure this out.

I bit my lip wondering what I could possibly do to get us out of this situation.

I looked back over to the camp where the merchant was still regarding John with a mask of surprise covering his features while John looked warily back.

The other men hadn't noticed what was passing between them yet when Cal spoke up.

"Lou, Rory we be'n waitin' for ya. See we got a bit 'o a situation here" He said with a jerk of his head towards John.

"We found 'ol Robert here in our trap and we don' know what ta do wit' 'im" Jer supplied.

Either Lou or Rory nodded his head and looked at John suspiciously. The merchant's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Mayhaps I be missin' somethin' but 'o is Robert eh?"

I closed my eyes in dread. This was it.

Cal gave him a funny look "Who else Rory bu' the lad," He said with a nod to John

Rory only chuckled. C

! "Why tha' there's Prince Johnathan no' Robert. What manner 'o joke is this?"

I looked warily on and noticed Brice's eyes flash. This was going from bad to worse.

He strolled over to John and grabbed him by the chin pulling his face up.

"Prince Johnathan is it?" He said menacingly "Wha? Come to spy on us have ye?" I saw John's face pale.

"N-no" He stuttered. "I.. ah.. I ran away.. got lost.. mistake.. not a spy..." He trailed off into unintelligent rambling and I saw his face gain color quickly from embarrassment. Oh for goodness sake! This was hardly the time to lose your cool John.

Brice hissed at him which frightened me to no end. And Cal and the rest of the men merely watched.

They wouldn't hurt him would they? Surely someone would step in, Rory at least who knew him. Right?

Brice let go of him abruptly, causing him to stumble forward and fall to his knees. He glared up with all of the dignity he

could muster.

"A pretty penny we could get from 'im eh?" He asked the men with a dark chuckle. "I reckon we send a piece back to the king. See he gets the message not to send no spies out here eh?" He looked John over with a critical eye that made me sick and scared. Now would be a good time to step in Celia.

Any minute now.

Come on!

It was no use, I was frozen in place, stunned.

I saw Rory fidgeting and shifting from foot to foot while stealing furtive looks at Cal, who remained silent. The rest of the men hung back, obviously not wanting to get involved.

Suddenly Brice pulled out a sword so fast I hadn't even seen him reach for it. He levelled it in front of John moving it around as if contemplating where to make the first incision.

The glint of cold steel knocked me out of my reverie and woke a deep and hidden fury within my chest. I was furious. Before I registered my movements I was leaping up and drawing my own sword. I strode coolly out of the woods while keeping my sword pointed directly forward.

"Don't touch him."

Everyone turned to me at once with startled looks and put their hands on their hilts. They were about to pull them out when Cal put his hand up to stop them.

I didn't even flinch at the odds, right now was no time to show fear.

Brice had his eyes on me, and his sword was pointed directly back at me.

Cal spoke up taking charge.

"What's this? You his spy partner?" He asked me. I was surprised that his speech was proper and not as crude as the other men's.

I didn't take my eyes off Brice while answering. "Of course not, I'm only his friend."

"A friend eh? And why should we be believin' that eh? What with 'the Prince' here already havin' lied to us?"

Keeping my expression neutral I lifted my gaze slightly and looked for the merchant. Meeting his gaze I lifted my wrist high so that the bracelet was clearly visible.

"I'm sure Rory would be happy to vouch for me" I stated.

Cal's eyebrows shot up and his look of incredulity was mirrored in all the men's face as they turned to Rory.

He squinted his eyes at my wrist, and suddenly his face lit up.

"Why tis Miss Celia!" He turned excitedly to the others "The Prince bought that off me he did, and gives it to her, I remember. I saw it on 'er later in the palace when she was down on h'r hands 'n knees helpin' me when my wares did drop she did" He gave me a kind smile, which I responded to with a curt nod.

The men turned back towards me in interest.

"Alright girly, let's say you are who you claim to be. What's it to us eh? You're outnumbered lass."

I shrugged. Like that was going to stop me.

The men huddled together, probably deciding what to do with me, but I wasn't paying attention. My eyes stayed trained on Brice, who was mirroring my stance and looking at me calculatingly. Now that I was looking at him properly, he didn't seem quite as intimidating as I'd first thought. Sure, he was still fierce looking, but there were deep laugh lines etched around his eyes, and maybe under different circumstances he could be friendly, but for now he was my enemy.

Finally, the men broke up and Cal turned to me again.

"Mayhaps we can make a deal here lass, and this here is a generous offer considering."

I nodded to show I was listening, though I didn't risk looking at him.

"We'll give 'im back to you for a price," He said.

"A ransom you mean?" I asked coolly.

They nodded. I thought about it. It was simple enough, but unfortunately I didn't have the kind of money they would require on me, nor would they take my word to bring them the money. And how could I trust them to let us go unharmed even if they did agree?

No, it was too risky. I had to turn this to my advantage somehow.

And between warriors there was only one other way to solve things.

"A duel," I stated, "I'll fight for his freedom against anyone of you."

I briefly raised my gaze to see how they took this. Cal had his eyebrows raised and two of the others were chuckling softly. Rory looked at me impressed, and Brice's expression remained blank.

The men conferred for another moment and nodded.

"We accept your terms lass, shall we say to first red?"

It was a standard procedure. The first man to draw blood won. I was about to nod my acceptance when Brice cut in with a growl.

"No. That aint how we do things here in th' wood and ye all know it. This lass aint no green knight. We fight to the death."

I tensed and seized him up. Could I take him? The men didn't interfere and for the first time since revealing myself I looked at John. He was looking at Brice in fear with a pale face and shaking uncontrollably. He would never get out of this alive if I lost. His gaze moved over to me and when he saw me looking at him tried to control his emotions and act calm while shaking his head at me firmly. That made my decision for me. He needed me, whether he would admit it or not.

I turned back to Brice, "I accept."

"No!" John yelled. Everyone looked back to see him white with fear. "Don't Celia, please! I'm not worth it!" He choked

out with a voice thick with grief. He held his hands up to show the bonds around his wrist. "I'll fight for my own freedom," he announced hastily.

"You are worth it," I murmured too quietly for anyone to hear.

I bit my lip to keep from rushing over there to reassure him, but the men had all turned to me and I shook my head against his fighting.

With a final look in his direction I saw him slump to the ground helplessly and turned back to Brice.

"To the death," I confirmed.

He gave me a curt nod, took several steps back and lowered his sword.

I did the same and we waited while the rest of the men cleared the space for our fight. All of them avoided looking me in the eye, all except Cal who hadn't moved an inch this whole time and continued to stare at me in confusion.

John finally covered the haunted look in his eyes and stared at the middle of the makeshift arena expressionlessly. Rory cleared away some debris around me and clasped my shoulder gently before moving off to the side.

Once all the men had moved to take places Cal strode to the middle and looked me and in the eye as he spoke.

"This duel, bein' fought for the custody of Prince John will be to th' death." He waited until we both nodded and moved off to the side. When he was clear we took a few steps toward each other and bowed, coming up in a defensive position. We circled each other quietly and I was impressed to see

that he was an experienced fighter by the way he assessed me the same way I was assessing him. This would only make things harder.

Knowing I was fighting a larger opponent I knew it would be better to take the defensive so I waited him out, judging that he would lose patience before me.

I was right.

With a growl he whipped his sword at my shoulder and I got my sword up only just in time. He was fast, I thought grimly, but I knew he was already. I would just have to watch his body for hints.

His stomach bunched and I yanked my sword down to block my middle.

He continued to press the attack and I continued to block. He swiped at my legs and I jumped to avoid the hit and countered with a thrust to his waist. He barely caught the blow and grinned, obviously impressed at my skill.

However, once he seemed sure that I was good he pressed harder and I had to work frantically to hold him off but my sword arm was getting progressively sorer with each jarring block I had to make. I felt a rivet of sweat run down my forehead and made a quick flurried attack. I brushed it away before it could get into my eyes but Brice used the moment to thrust his sword at my exposed waist. I managed to turn my body to the side but took a glancing blow to my sword arm above the elbow.

It wasn't a deep cut but I grimaced as the blood ran down and dripped to the ground. I heard an anguished muffled cry from the sidelines and suddenly found strength. I was doing this for John, losing wasn't an option.

I ignored the pain and transferred my sword to the left arm. Brice's eyes widened as I caught the next blow and he nodded approvingly. I was glad that I had practiced hard to be just as good left handed as right, and I would need that advantage; I had to win soon or it would be death. I was already tired and sore, and now I was bleeding. That would weaken me even quicker, but so long as I remembered I was doing this for John I'd be okay. I had to be.

I could see that Brice was tired but he still had the advantage. It was time to take the offensive. With a grunt of pain I pushed my useless arm behind my back to keep it out of the way and stepped up to meet his next blow head on. I followed with a thrust to his middle and immediately moved into a swipe at his legs.

Now he was the one walking back as I kept up a constant stream of blows, not giving him the chance to send any of his own. He narrowed his eyes in concentration and seemed to just barely block all of my moves. I needed to take him by surprise somehow. I faked to his left side and dropped low swinging my sword out in a circle hoping to either trip him up or make him have to jump to avoid the hit. He jumped and I swung out quickly to nick his ankle, then threw my sword above my head to catch the downward swing of his weapon. I quickly sprung up and aimed for his unhurt leg. He was quick to block, but as I'd expected he'd forgotten about, or misjudged his hurt leg and wavered slightly to regain his balance. It was all the advantage I needed. I stepped up and locked my sword with his, forcing him to put pressure on his hurt ankle. I could see the sweat running down his face from the strain and he gritted his teeth as I pushed forward making him lean back. He winced from the pain I was forcing on his leg and I took a step forward. He tried to shift his weight and I smiled. His face registered

shock as he realized my set up just before his sword flew out of his grasp and he collapsed to the floor.

I touched my sword tip to his throat and panted hard. I had won, but it was a close one.

"You can kill him."

I looked up at Cal who was regarding me blankly. "It's your right."

I had forgotten they were even there.

With a deep breath I relaxed my hold on my weapon and removed it from its lethal position.

"I don't believe in unnecessary waste." Truthfully I'd never before killed a man and just the thought of it made me feel dirty, but I didn't need to let them know that. I wiped my sword clean and sheathed it.

Brice, whose eyes had been closed expecting death, looked up at me in wonder. I held my hand out to him and he clasped it with a grin jumping up with a wobble. He didn't let go of my forearm right away and clapped my shoulder like an old friend.

"Amazin'." I grinned at him and looked to see everyone else looking at me with awe. Cal looked relieved that I hadn't killed Brice and even gave me a nod when he caught my eye.

"That was an impressive win lass, an keepin' true to our word you're both free to go."

I looked toward John with a triumphant smile only to see him sitting on the ground with his face buried in his hands. I

hadn't even noticed them cutting his bonds.

As I walked up to him I could hear him breathing heavily and mumbling to himself. I listened hard; he was saying 'never again' over and over. What was that about?

Obviously he hadn't heard me coming up so I gently placed my hand on his shoulder, not wanting to startle him. "John?"

His head whipped up, and when he registered it was me he leaped up and before I knew what was happening, he had me in a bone crushing hug that knocked the breath out of me. I stumbled back from the force of it but his grip didn't falter in the slightest.

"John... let... go," I forced out. He really needed to let go, I could hardly breathe here.

"Never gain, don't you EVER scare me like that again Cece," He said fiercely through his suddenly wet eyes. He was crying over me? But I was fine, so what was there to be upset about?

He squeezed tighter, and a shot of pain lanced up my arm. I'd forgotten about that.

"John... arm."

He finally let go and I took a deep breath in relief.

"Miss, ye might be wantin' ter wrap that up," Rory said walking up. "Best let me help ye, tis a nasty cut and ye don't be wantin' it infected!" He had a bundle of cloth in his arms and a bottle of some salve.

"Ye'll both be staying wit us tonight 'o course, and we'll take ye to the edge 'o the woods in the mornin'. The boys was

mighty impressed lady," Rory said. I smiled at him faintly as the exhaustion caught up to me and he stepped forward to help me bind the wound when John took the stuff from him. Rory nodded at John approvingly and pointed behind us to point out a small stream before walking off.

John grabbed my forearm and gently pulled me forward to sit on a tree stump. His eyes were dry but his face was shaded red and I guessed he was embarrassed for his reaction just now, but I didn't have the energy to brush it off. The aches and pains that I hadn't noticed during the fight were making their presence known at once. John knelt down and soaked one rag in water. He held my hurt arm steady and dabbed at the blood. I bit my lip to keep from crying out at the sting.

He looked up at me sympathetically but didn't say anything.

While the blood hadn't bothered me during the duel I felt nauseous seeing it now.

I must have had a funny look on my face because John was looking at me with an amused expression. I half smiled and shook my head at him before closing my eyes to block out the sight.

I could feel John wiping more blood away and then the cool relief of the salve. Finally he started binding up the wound tightly with cloth, but I still didn't open my eyes. I was thinking about how upset John had been when I agreed to the fight. I was touched that he actually cared. Especially with the way we've been since I found him, treading over glass...

I felt the brush of something warm against my lips and my eyes flew open in surprise. John was already walking back towards the camp.

Had he...?

I shook my head. I'd probably just imagined it. And yet, I could feel a tingle in my lips and blushed in surprise.

I got up and walked over to the men, who were now sitting around a fire.

Brice saw me approach and moved over to leave me a space between himself and John.

I collapsed beside them as all the trials of the last few days caught up with me. I registered laughter, felt pats on the back, and nods of approval. Several glasses of cider were raised in my name, but I just smiled warily through it all and felt my eyelids drop lower with every blink.

My eyes flew open when I felt myself being lifted up off the ground. I blinked in surprise, immediately tensing up when I heard a familiar laugh above me.

"Relax, it's just me." I looked around to see that the fire was now down to embers and the men were scattered around in heaps, probably asleep. I looked up to see John carrying me and was about to protest that I could walk on my own, but I was too tired to plead my case. Instead I yawned and relaxed into his hold, we couldn't be going far anyway.

Just like I thought, a few steps later he placed me gently down on the ground and laid a blanket over me. I smiled sleepily but he didn't see in the dark. Shadows played across his face as he stood above me and he ran his hand through his hair. He turned away. Was he leaving?

"Where are you going?" I asked annoyed. I was close to the tree he'd been tied next to last night but I still didn't

particularly want to be alone. Or maybe I just didn't want him to go…?

He looked at me in surprise. Well I think it was surprise, I could hardly see.

"Will you lie down already? You're making my neck sore from looking up."

He lay down awkwardly on his back, making sure to keep plenty of room between us. I blinked feeling sleep come back now that he was safely beside me. Funny that I was still concerned about him when it had been my life in danger.

He turned on his side to face me and propped himself up on an elbow.

He reached a hand over and fingered the bracelet on my wrist. "When did you find out?" He murmured.

"I bumped into Rory when I was looking for you, and he recognized it. But I think the better question is why didn't

tell me?"

He shrugged awkwardly, "I thought you would like it better if you didn't know it was from me."

That's just silly. Did he really think that? Then again, a few weeks ago that might very well have been true. Still I wasn't about to confirm it. "I would have loved it either way. Thank you"

He didn't say anything but couldn't keep the grin off his face either. He moved his hand back to his side and I twisted my wrist so the bracelet would catch the light. Its beauty never

ceased to surprise me, and I was amazed that John picked such a perfect gift.

I was just drifting off to sleep again when John spoke.

"You know you scared the hell out of me right?" He whispered.

I mirrored his position, suddenly wide awake. "You were worried?" I knew he was, from the slightly haunted look filling his eyes, but for some reason I wanted to hear him say it.

He looked up at the sky and shook his head "You have

idea... I thought..." He shuddered and didn't complete the thought.

"I might have a better idea than you think," I mumbled and fell back on my back. "You just... disappeared." I didn't turn to see his reaction, just kept my gaze on the stars.

The silence lasted for so long that I thought he wouldn't say anything until I felt his fingers lace through mine. I looked at him in surprise and found his eyes pleading and full of remorse.

"I am so sorry," He said genuinely.

I blinked in surprise and nodded, squeezing his hand to let him know it was okay.

He smiled, seeming relieved and laid back down with one hand under his head.

He slacked his grip on my hand, about to pull away, and without thinking I held on tighter.

I bit my lip realizing what I'd just done. John gave me a shy smile as a blush crept up his cheeks, but he didn't protest.

As for me, I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

The Last Dance (14)

Hello! Sorry for the long wait, I've been writing like mad lately but it's been all over the place and I have bits and pieces for the next few chapters but they still need to be worked. Anyhow I hope this is worth the wait =)

Comment and Vote?

And if commenting is too much work at least vote, it's just one click, please?

Enjoy,

xo.

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Chapter 14 - Trapped

John was already awake and sitting up when I opened my eyes. He was blinking sleepily and running a hand through his hair. When he saw me awake he brought a finger to his lips and jerked his head to the men. I followed his gaze and saw that everyone was huddled in a tight circle speaking frantically. I rubbed my eyes to wake up more fully and squinted trying to figure out what was going on. I could only make out Caleb's expression, and it was one of concern. His brow was furrowed and he nodded tersely in response to something. I turned back to John and cocked an eyebrow. He shrugged and jumped up, then put a hand out for me. I regarded his hand in mild surprise; whatever we were to each other now, it seemed to involve being more polite. Well, that was unacceptable. He got points for being sweet I

suppose, but if he thought things could change just like that, well he had another thing coming. I enjoyed our bickering too much to just give it up. No, I had no intention of becoming the kind of acquaintances that acted distant and polite towards each other.

Please.

What fun was that?

I hid a smile so he wouldn't catch on and took his hand. He started to pull me up but instead I yanked his hand down hard, using the momentum to lift myself up. Not expecting the trick he tripped forward and ended up on the ground and I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. He looked up at me with shock written all over his face and seemed to be wondering how he ended up on the ground. I couldn't hold it in any longer and bent over giggling uncontrollably, his expression was just so priceless.

The John I knew would have gotten angry, thrown some kind of tantrum, or crossed his arms stubbornly waiting for an apology. He would

be content with rolling his eyes at me, especially with a smile tugging up the corners of his lips, and if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes I'd never believe it. I guess last night had been a changing point for us, to what I don't exactly know, friends maybe? Humph, well I suppose I could live with that. So long as it wasn't anything formal. And knowing John... I mentally rolled my eyes and half smiled. He either would be overly polite or too much of a jerk. I wonder if he could manage a middle ground. Well, at least I'd broken the ice on this polite business.

Not happening.

While I was thinking John had gotten up again, and our commotion had drawn the attention of the men. Most only spared us a moment's glance while Brice and Rory looked on knowingly; even Caleb had a slight smile on his face. I was about to turn to John and ask why they were giving us such funny looks when Caleb extracted himself from the group and started heading over. The rest went back to their urgent discussions and I hoped Caleb was coming to fill us in on what was going on. Clearly, we'd missed something big while we were asleep.

"What's going on Caleb?" I unconsciously shifted to put myself between Caleb and John. It was becoming a reflex protecting him.

"We got some bad news a few hours ago." He looked both weary and stressed, as if it had been a long night, and I felt bad for having been asleep through it, though it couldn't be much later than six in the morning.

He sighed heavily "There was a forest fire started last night, and still seems to be going strong. It should not a been a problem bu' the wind changed an tis burning out a company out here, some friends 'o ours I might be adding, terrible thing" He shook his head sadly and I put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly.

"I'm so sorry, was anyone hurt? Is there anything we can do?"

He smiled faintly. "That's awful kind of you Miss Celia, seems Rory spoke true 'bout you, but I'm sure ye be needing ta get the Prince back home."

"Well, we've already been gone so long, what's another day?"

Caleb hesitated and seemed about to refuse our help when John cut in. "Cece's right, we insist," he said firmly. I turned slightly and smiled faintly at him, nodding in approval. He seemed genuinely concerned, which might actually be a first for him.

Caleb looked at us thoughtfully then slowly smiled. "Alright, we'll take your help then, and much appreciated it is." He clasped John's forearm warmly and went to deliver the news to the others.

"Well, well, an actual show of compassion My Prince? Surely this is one for the royal archives," I teased.

He grinned back; "That's John to you."

***

Everyone was ready to set out within a matter of minutes and we were on our way. No one bothered to blindfold us and I took that to mean we had managed to gain their trust, or at least respect. After an hour's walk we began noticing a smattering of ashes littering the ground, and some blackened branches.

John and I exchanged a grimace while the men looked around worriedly. As we continued the air got heavier and the smell of sulpher grew stronger. After another hour the men stopped to discuss something.

Brice made his way over to us with a bundle of rags.

"Alright youngin's now things get tricky. Take these cloths to the river and soak um well, then tie 'em around yer mouth an nose ter keep the smoke out."

We nodded our understanding and headed to the river. The smell of wood burning was strong in the air, and we hadn't even gotten close to the flames. We soaked the cloths and wrung them out, then tied a pair around our mouths like we'd been told. We took the others to the men and they did the same.

The packs were left by a copse of trees and only essentials were taken with us. On Brice's instruction we all waded through the river to soak our clothes, apparently it would give us a temporary relief from the heat of the fire. I did what I was told anxiously. Suddenly the enormity of what we were doing hit me. This was dangerous and risky. There was no opponent here to beat, nothing that would bleed with a sword or could be out maneuvered. We were up against the elements here and I lacked my usual confidence.

Having prepared as much as we could, we made our way into the trees. I took deep breaths to calm myself down until I felt a reassuring squeeze to my shoulder. I looked up to see John walking next to me with a grim look on his face.

"Stay close to me, I'll keep you safe." I was baffled at how calm he was, while I was almost shaking with fear. I nodded and inched closer, feeling more secure already. It should have seemed ironic that the tables could turn so completely and I now needed the protection, but in this case I was glad for it.

***

After a few more minutes of marching we started hearing noises and could see smoke curling up from the trees in blinding swirls. As we drew closer the noises became more distinct and I could hear orders being shouted and children crying. I pang of horror run through me as I realized this was

a full company, there were women and children at risk here too, and my knees started to tremble.

We marched past a line of trees and I froze. Frazzled women ran helplessly about clutching at their children. Old men were being carried out of harm's way and older children grimly worked alongside the adults. Anyone unable to help was taken to the other side of the river where some possessions seemed to have survived. Everyone had charred garments and was covered in ashes. I was startled to see that some women deposited their kids on the shore and headed back into the chaos. Some men tried to keep order and check who was accounted for.

My gaze moved beyond the scene before me and I swallowed to keep the bile from rising in my throat. Orange flames licked the trunks of trees and devoured everything in sight. There were people on fire. I started shaking, surprised I could still hold up my own weight. My senses suddenly flared to life and everything came in high resolution. People dropped to the floor trying to put out the flames while others crawled out choking on the fumes. Many staggered out and collapsed only to be picked up or dragged away. My eyes burned from the ashes and went immediately dry. And the smell, it was of burning flesh. The sight made me sick and yet I could not tear my eyes away. They were riveted on this gruesome sight of blackened skin and singed hair and clothes. I ran to a tree and dry heaved feeling sick.

My stomach contracted painfully and I stood there shaking. I felt another squeeze on my shoulder and looked up with tears in my eyes from the smoke. John was still beside me radiating calm though I could see the sorrow in his eyes. His skin looked clammy and pale, and there was the hint of a haunted look in his eyes but otherwise he seemed fine.

He hadn't broken down like I had.

He waited by me patiently while the feeling ebbed away and I regained control over myself.

"Are you okay?" He asked gently.

I nodded tersely. "I'm fine… it just… took me by surprise."

"Aye, seein' a fire the first time is a nightmare it is. You'll be fine lass, just breathe." Brice had walked up to us covered in soot and ash.

"Where is everyone?" I looked around noticing we were the only one left of our party.

"They be down river tryin' to contain the flames, ye ready to join them?"

John looked towards me to give the answer and I nodded with a jerk of the head. We walked downriver and I kept my eyes away from the scene I knew lay on my left. John noticed and moved to stand beside me so that he blocked the view and I gratefully offered him a weak smile. We reached the other men and were handed buckets. There was some kind of system in place and we found ourselves in the middle of it. We frantically filled buckets and passed them down the line as more came back empty. The clothes we'd wet earlier were dry and scratched our even drier skin. My eyes burned from the smoke but we didn't even have the worst of it, being downwind. My actions were automatic and I took reassurance from the steady movement. As my hands worked on their own I began noticing the sounds around me again. Some of the madness seemed to have died down as even more people made it to the other bank safely.

And then I heard it, a wailing off to my left. Coming from the fire we were so diligently trying to contain. I looked around me but no one seemed to have noticed the sound. Was there a child stuck in there?

Without thinking I ran in the direction of the noise hoping I had only imagined it. I dimly heard someone calling my name but didn't slow down. I raced through the trees as the crying became louder. I hadn't imagined it. Trees whipped past me scratching my skin and ripping my clothes, but I didn't care, nothing mattered to me at the moment but finding the poor child who was alone and helpless. I ran on following the sound and finally burst into a clearing. The flames formed a wall on the other side of the clearing and the only reason they hadn't closed into the middle was because of the lack of foliage to burn. I ran to the center were a little girl was standing looking frightened. She held a baby in her arms and was turning in circles in apparent confusion while the baby cried on.

I ran and knelt before her and her eyes lit up in hope. "I lost mommy." Her voice didn't betray even the hint of a quiver; she sounded like she was merely stating a fact. There was no fear in her eyes either, only an edge of determination and I felt ashamed that the fire had rendered me so helpless earlier while she stood strong.

"We'll find her sweetie." The child nodded at me, without any doubt that I would find her mother. A crash had me whirling around in time to see Brice fall through the trees.

"Dammit lass, if yer going ta run off ye tell someone." He said angry.

His gaze moved past me to see the children and he gaped. Without another word he ran forward and scooped them into

his arms jerking his head to motion for me to follow him. He sprinted forward into the trees and I stumbled forward trying to follow but I was too slow. A branch dropped inches from my feet and I jumped back from the blaze of heat that washed over me.

Frightened I stumbled blindly back and looked around me for an escape. My heartbeat quickened to an erratic pace and my breathing got heavy.

I looked around in panic for another opening. Seeing one, I ran to the right only to be cut off again.

Panic started to overwhelm me as I realized I was alone. Everywhere I looked was only fire, columns of it surrounding me. The circle of trees around me was ignited and I was stuck in the middle. I was trapped and the flames felt like they were closing in around me.

I felt dizzy, I felt like I couldn't breathe.

My head pounded and spots began appearing before me. It was coming closer, I could feel it. I was trapped. I was trapped. My fear consumed me. I wasn't safe anymore. I was trapped. No one even knew I was here did they? Only Brice knew and he was gone.

I was alone.

Trapped.

The spots before my eyes got bigger and I struggled to stay conscious. I fell to my knees, the smoke was thick around me and I vaguely remembered being told to stay low when there was smoke. Somewhere along the way I had lost my mask and now fought to breathe, fought to stay calm. I knew it was a losing battle. I was trapped and alone. The

roaring din of the fire sounded all around me, drowning out all my sense and leaving only fear behind.

Trapped.

Overwhelmed I closed my eyes, only to see flames reaching up behind my eyelids. My eyes flew open and I whimpered in fear and felt tears coursing down my cheeks. I was surrounded.

Trapped.

"Celia? CELIA?"

My mind dimly registered a panicked voice from somewhere, but no, I must be hallucinating. I was alone.

My eyelids felt heavy, my limbs felt like lead. I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. And it was warm here, so warm. I felt sleepy and suddenly peaceful.

"Celia! CELIA!"

The voice seemed louder and more urgent.

Who was making so much noise? I was tired. Couldn't they let me sleep?

Shadows danced before my eyes inviting me to sleep. I would. I wanted to. My body relaxed, I could hardly keep my eyes open.

"Celia please, where are you?" Someone yelled.

I felt a pang in my chest. I was hurting someone. They sounded sad. I wanted to raise my head to say something, but I couldn't find the strength. My throat was raw and dry and no sound could be forced from it.

And anyway, I was trapped, they couldn't get to me.

"Celia?"

The flames rose higher and higher behind my eyelids. They beckoned to me, reaching forward to nip my skin, caressing, burning, inviting. They whispered to me, hissing, steaming, and sputtering.

A dark break formed in the line of flames but I hadn't the strength to move towards it, it was too late.

I could only hear the roar of the fire burning higher, consuming, destroying. I felt it, scorching, burning, melting.

I was just so tired... I blinked once... twice..... and let the blackness embrace me in its warmth.

The Last Dance (15)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 15 - Awake

My head was pounding something awful. I hurt everywhere, and yet I felt numb. I didn't know where I was, or even if I was alive, and yet a sense of calm encompassed me. I felt blissfully ignorant, and remarkably safe, though I had no idea if any of that was true or not.

My senses started coming back to me slowly.

First came the sensation of pain. I felt stiff all over, lethargic, with no desire to move even though my mind encouraged me to do so.

Memories came flooding back to me in a rush, the girl stranded, the branch blocking my path, being surrounded, trapped and alone, my sense of hopelessness, the voice...

What was true? I couldn't distinguish reality from my own imagination. Did someone find me?

Yes. The answer came immediately to my mind.

I was safe. I knew it but couldn't explain where the conviction came from.

'Stay close to me, I'll keep you safe' the phrase echoed in my mind. It pushed back my fears, renewed my calm.

I could hear my heart beating, smooth and steady, could feel the breath leave and return to my body in a calming rhythm. I felt vigorously alive and wanted even more to open my eyes.

It was a struggle, but I finally managed it, feeling proud of myself for the effort. I blinked slowly getting used to the motion. Wherever I was, it was dimly lit and my eyes adjusted slowly. A tan roof stretched above me, I was in a tent.

My gaze travelled down to the figure sitting by my side.

He was asleep, his heart beating in sync with my own. He looked peaceful but for the wrinkle between his eyes betraying his worry. His hair was messily spread over his closed eyelids, and his head rested on top of my stomach like a pillow. It was a comfortable weight; seeming as though he'd been sitting up hunched over and had given into sleep unwillingly.

My gaze travelled to my hand, intertwined with his and again reassurance swept through me. I felt a surge of emotion towards this boy, the one who saved me.

'Stay close to me, I'll keep you safe'.

He'd kept his promise though I'd failed in mine. I hadn't stayed close, yet he'd managed to keep me safe. I focused my energy, willing my hand to squeeze his, erase that wrinkle, and prove I was okay, because of him.

I struggled, screwed up my eyes in concentration, and realized how exhausted I really was. But I was determined,

and so I pushed, and succeeded. His eyes blinked open slowly, in confusion. He raised his head, his eyes travelled first to our hands, then, inch by inch they moved further up. He hesitated, bit his lip, and murmured under his breath. I tried to listen to what he was saying and managed to catch a few words 'please... hallucinating... awake... hope...please '.

He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a deep breath as if preparing himself for disappointment. I had the strange urge to giggle but kept it in check; I was probably still dizzy. When he opened his eyes again they tentatively drew upwards... to meet with mine.

The reaction was immediate. His face lit up like a thousand candles being lit at once, relief exploded behind his eyes before they became glassy with tears. He blinked back furiously, the smile on his face radiant.

"Celia," He breathed.

It felt as if the wind carried my name from his lips straight into my body. It resonated within me, giving me strength. It was his voice that had called to me, pleaded with me, refused to stop looking for me.

I returned the smile, forgetting for a moment everything but the two of us, but reality caught up soon enough and I was flooded with questions. I asked the one that meant the most to me first.

"How did you find me?" My voice came out raspy, my throat felt raw and burned as my voice pushed its way out, but I refused to let that stop me.

John got up and filled a glass with water from the pitcher. He looked uncertainly at me for a moment before sitting at the

edge of the bed. Putting the glass down, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gently lifted me partway up. I was a little embarrassed at needing the help but didn't want to object when he was being so nice.

He cradled me to his chest and brought the glass to my lips. I felt almost fragile in his arms, the way he held me so delicately, like I was about to break. No one had ever treated me like that, not even my parents who knew I didn't want the coddling. And yet, with John of all people, I found I didn't mind it. It felt nice.

The water sliding down my throat brought nothing but relief and helped wash away the taste of ash that coated my tongue.

He put the glass back on the counter but didn't make any move to put me back down. Well, that was fine; I was comfortable as I was. I leaned closer to him and he froze in surprise before relaxing. He put his other arm around me and hugged me closer, leaning back against the headboard and pulling me back with him.

I felt a blush creep up my cheeks and was grateful he wasn't at an angle to see. This felt intimate, more so than the dancing had because at least then I'd known, or thought, he was just teasing. But this was different, more real and much scarier. He started stroking my hair absentmindedly and the soothing motion relaxed me and made me feel drowsy. I felt my eyelids getting heavier, but then blinked back the tiredness when I realized he hadn't answered my question earlier.

"How did you find me?" I whispered, glad to hear my voice sounded normal again.

He stiffened around me, his grip too tight before he let out a deep breath and relaxed again, unconsciously pulling me closer.

"I followed your trail, the same way you found me... it was easy enough since you'd left quite a mess on the way... but then... the trail... it just... disappeared. There was a wall of fire raging so high I thought you must have gone around but I couldn't find you"

I felt a tear on my cheek, but it wasn't my own. I looked up to see an anguished look on John's face. His eyes were squeezed shut and the single tear that had fallen traced a wet trail down his cheek, the only evidence it had even happened. What should I do? Surely the least would be to comfort him as he was doing for me.

I stiffly raised my hand to brush against his cheek to wipe the line away. His eyes flew open to reveal a pained look and I knew he was reliving the chase all over again. The look was quickly replaced with something tender as he remembered I was alright and he shakily raised his own hand to cover mine.

"I ran in circles calling your name but there was no answer, and the smoke made it so hard to see... but then it occurred to me that you might be..."

He hesitated, his hand dropped down, taking mine with it to settled on his thigh, and I knew the words caused him pain as he remembered.

"Trapped... I tried finding a way through the circle of fire and through some twisted act of fate happened to be in just the right place with there was a break in the wall. I dove through and saw you crumpled on the floor and I thought I was too late... but I couldn't think of that... I had to believe

you were alive... so I picked you up and tried to find a way out but there wasn't any. I didn't know what to do, just that I had to somehow get us out of there, and I was just about to take my chances running through the wall when Brice came. I guess he noticed when you weren't behind him... he told me later how you'd rushed into the inferno to save a little girl and baby, they made it back to their mother by the way" He said with a brief smile. "Anyway, Brice had brought help and they managed to douse a small section of the flames for us to get through"

"And the fire? Did it get put out?"

"Yes, thanks to the rain two nights ago. We kept it contained all day and then the rain finished the job for us."

"Wait, how long have I been out for?"

"This would be the end of the third day." I gaped in shock. I'd been unconscious for that long?

"And you've... been with me this whole time?"

"Well I helped the villagers during the day and stayed here every night" He looked embarrassed for a moment before a defensive look came into his eyes as if I would scold him for sitting here for three nights. I was actually touched by his concern but was afraid to think too much of it. Anyone would be worried.

Yes, but would they stay by your side all night hunched over in a chair for three days straight? A voice whispered in my mind. I didn't want to think too much into it, and instead just smiled up at him.

"Thank you" I whispered.

His lips twitched into a rueful smile. "That's twice now on this adventure you've almost killed yourself. What am I going to do with you?" He whispered back lightening the mood.

I widened my smile. "You know I only put myself in danger because you take such good care of me after." I teased, while at the same time realizing how true it was.

He chuckled softly, though his eyes remained wary. "That's it, when you get out of here I'm tying us together and not letting go."

I grinned, "Promise?"

He shook his head and I watched his face as it took on an amused look as if wondering why he put up with me. And right after that to a look of something I couldn't define. This erased just as fast to one of even more amusement, as if he thought he was crazy, but didn't mind.

Or it could just have been my imagination, the moonlight reflecting funny, casting shadows across his face.

After a few moments of silence, another question drifted to the front of my mind but I was hesitant to ask it. Maybe it would be better off not knowing... but I'd see it soon enough. Better to be prepared for the sight. I braced myself and voiced my concern out loud feeling vain and foolish.

I tried to make light of the question, pretend I didn't care. "So... how bad is it? Will people run in terror when they see me?"

He chuckled softly. "It's not so bad, the small scratches are already healed." He murmured.

I braced myself for the worst anyway.

"You're face is fine, but there's a bigger cut on your neck..."

His finger traced a line down my neck causing the skin to tingle, and I became aware of the ridge of raised skin there.

"...the healer said it wont hurt you but a mark will always be there..."

I breathed out a sigh trying not to worry about my appearance, but it came out shaky since I was trying not to be so aware of his hand trailing down dangerously close to the neckline of my shirt.

"... you have a few burns as well..."

His hand lifted off my skin, but the heat remained.

"... luckily they were only surface burns, so no lasting damage but..."

I lost track of the rest of the sentence as his hand moved to rest on my hip and then slowly trail down to rest on my thigh where his thumb traced a circle repeatedly. I fought to hold back a gasp as sparks shot up through my body. Did he have any idea the effect his light caresses were doing to me?

And he didn't seem to be doing it on purpose either, he sounded half asleep, the touches languid like he wasn't aware of what he was doing.

As if proving my theory his hand abruptly stopped its movement, as he realized what he was doing. He removed it quickly as a blush rapidly filled his cheeks. He wouldn't

make eye contact with me but his face looked so mortified I couldn't help the giggle that escaped.

He gave me an exasperated look and raised his eyes to the canvas roof before trying to look innocent. "I'm sorry I... you should have stopped me." He didn't sound like he regretted it though.

I should have stopped him. Why didn't I? I shrugged uncertainly.

A wave of exhaustion hit me and I tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. John's eyes met mine once more.

"Sorry, I've kept you up, you should sleep" He said gently, still trying to hide his embarrassment. I nodded feeling my eyes getting heavier by the second.

"Only if you sleep too," I quietly argued. He looked like he hadn't slept much in the last few days, and no wonder if he'd been up with me since the fire.

I yawned and looked up at him to see a bewildered expression on his face. He wasn't looking me in the eye anymore and his eyes were darting around the room. What now?

He seemed to be having an internal argument and didn't seem to know what to do with himself. Oh, now I knew what was wrong.

"You can stay here, I don't mind."

He looked down at me finally and raised his eyebrow as if asking if I was sure while a blush crept up his cheeks yet again.

In reply I gingerly moved over and rested my head against his stomach. After a few tense moments where I felt embarrassed and nervous he swung his legs up on the bed and shifted to pull the blanket around us, but remained half seated leaning against the headboard.

I was glad he chose to remain that way so we wouldn't have to deal with the awkwardness of the situation in the morning, while still letting me keep close to him. I felt safe here, and it was with that knowledge I drifted off to sleep.

The Last Dance (16)

Hello!! This chapter wasn't supposed to be up until tomorrow but since I got such a nice comment and message I wanted to get it out tonight =)

Also I made a banner for the story! So if you've been wondering what the characters look like... ta daa!! They might not match the exact descriptions from the beginning of the book but I like these so much more.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 16 - Knights in Training

"Is she awake yet?"

"Shhh, Lyle can't you see her eyes are closed?"

"But she's been sleeping forever!" A voice whined.

I cracked open an eyelid and noticed with relief that John was no longer in here. The last thing I needed was to try and explain that.

I made an exaggeratedly loud yawn and the two girls at the foot of by bed made noises of excitement.

"She's alive!"

"Or course she was alive Lyle! She was breathing!"

I cleared my throat and they went immediately silent. I struggled to get into a sitting position when I felt a pair of arms around each of my elbows supporting me up. I smiled gratefully. Guess even over three days of sleep wasn't enough to fully recover.

"Thank you..." Oh, I didn't even know their names.

The older of the two girls curtseyed gracefully "Ranya, my lady."

"Oh, there'll be none of that 'lady' business now," I said with a smile.

"See I told you she wouldn't like it." The little girl stuck her tongue out at Ranya, who gave her an admonishing look.

She then went into a wobbly curtsey of her own. "I'm Lyle" She said cheerfully.

"Well, it's nice to meet you both, but to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Ranya blushed and handed me a folded piece of parchment.

"Prince Johnathan asked us to give this to you, we didn't read it." She hastily added.

I hid a smile and took the note.

'Celia,

Sorry I wasn't around to see you this morning,

I left early to help with the new settlement.

Take it easy today wont you?

And try not to endanger yourself while I'm gone.

I should be back by noon.

John'

How sweet, he actually left me a note to say he would be gone. I smiled at read it over once more. Of course he had to add the 'don't endanger yourself part'. It's not like I went out of the way to get hurt.

Usually.

Well, maybe. But it's always for a good cause.

I grinned to myself once more before remembering I had company.

"Thank you for delivering this."

"Oh it was no trouble; we wanted to meet you anyway!" Ranya exclaimed.

I was surprised to hear her outburst after how reserved she'd acted since arriving here. She blushed and looked away embarrassed by her own boldness.

"Well, I'm flattered, but I don't believe I've done anything to deserve such high praise."

"You ran into a fire after Mala! And that scary looking man, Brice? He's actually real nice, and told us all about your sword fight with him" Lyle said in wonder, her eyes going wide.

"Yes! How did you beat such a big opponent? How could you win against him? Some of our people can't even best him" Ranya gushed, all her shyness forgotten.

They're eyes were shining and I felt rather embarrassed.

Really, when you said it like that of course it sounded fantastic. But had anyone told them how stupid I'd been running into the fire without telling anyone first? That I had, in fact passed out and was carried out?

And I certainly hadn't come out of my fight with Brice unharmed either.

I opened my mouth to tell them the other sides of the story when a matronly older woman walked in carrying an overflowing tray. She was wearing the white waistband and silver medallion of a village healer.

"Well it's nice te see ye up Miss Celia, and about time we got that Prince 'o yer's to leave" She said with a wink. I blushed hoping she wasn't referring to last night.

"Came back every night he did. Quite the loyal young man ye've got."

"Oh! He's not... that is we're not... we're only friends... and even that's only on occasion" I hastily corrected feeling my cheeks get warmer. I definitely didn't need anyone jumping to conclusions.

"Aye, whatever ye say lass," She said with a smile.

I don't expect she believed me, but denying it any further would just be digging the hole deeper.

I looked at the tray she kept beside me and suddenly realized how hungry I was. And no wonder if I hadn't had any food in over three days! The healer noticed my look of longing and chuckled quietly before pushing a cup full of foul smelling liquid in my hands.

"Yer to finish tha' before eating anything hear? And the girls here'll tell me if ye try to dump it won't ye girls?"

They nodded vigorously as the healer walked out of the tent. I looked down at the cup in my hands suspiciously. I knew better than to disobey a healer but this was just disgusting.

The stuff in my cup was more the consistency of wet mud than anything else, and it hardly looked better. The stuff was the color of moss and smelled strongly of herbs. It steamed slightly and I had to force myself not to gag, before even attempting to try it.

I cautiously brought it to my lips and before I could think about it for long knocked back a healthy dose... and then almost spit it back out.

I forced myself to shallow and shuddered as it slid down my throat.

"Wonderful, its tastes even worse than it looks, who would have thought that was possible?" I muttered to myself.

There was giggling in the corner and I looked up to see Ranya and Lyle with their hands over their mouths trying not to laugh.

"I'd like to see you two do any better" I sniffed, trying to regain my dignity.

"Oh, Miss Aubrey makes foul teas' alright, we've had our shares, but they work" Ranya quickly informed me with amusement in her eyes.

I mumbled incoherently as I brought the cup back up. If I could run into a fire and best men in duels I could certainly handle a healing drought!

I pinched my nose with my fingers and tipped the cup back gulping it down as fast as I could and swallowing long after it was gone to get rid of the slimy sensation left behind.

Another cup was held out for me by Ranya but this one contained some kind of fruit juice. I smiled gratefully and took a sip to clear my mouth.

When I handed the glass back Lyle moved a table right up to the edge of the bed and placed the tray of food there. Finally!

"Shall we leave you alone then?" Lyle asked sadly.

"Don't be silly, I can't eat all of this by myself, and it would be a shame to waste it. I insist you join me"

They accepted cheerfully and sat down on either side of me.

I asked them about the new camp being set up and what life was like living in the forest. They seemed to enjoy it, but then again, it was all they knew. They in turn asked me about the castle, and I found myself missing the comforts that I had so often taken for granted. Their eyes got wide and bright with excitement as I talked about the practice courts and tournaments always going on, about all the wings of the castle and the constant stream of nobles going to and from their estates.

"We want to visit someday, ma said we can, when we're older" Ranya said.

"We want to learn to fight! Become knights like you have" Lyle said eagerly.

"Well, I didn't train to become a knight exactly, I just learned how to use all the weapons I could get my hands on," I said fondly.

They nodded in admiration and I was surprised at their conviction towards this path. It wasn't an easy one. Lyle I could easily see taking on the burden, but Ranya was more of a surprise. I didn't doubt that she could do it, but she had better shed that nervousness of hers fast.

"What experience do you girls have with weapons so far?" I asked

"We can both shot well, with a slingshot and bow. Everyone out here learns that early on to hunt for game" Ranya explained.

I nodded, expecting that answer. If there was one thing I admired out here, it was that the women were expected to share the same skills as the men. Everyone was needed for survival.

"Any experience with a sword?"

"Well... we were hoping you might give us some tips. We know the basics though," Lyle said shyly.

"Of course, do you have your weapons nearby?"

They looked at me in shock. "Right now?"

"Well why not? I don't expect to be here long. In fact, I'd like to head out as soon as John returns, so the sooner the better."

They exchanged looks of excitement and rushed out to get their stuff. I took my time getting up making sure everything functioned properly. I was stiff certainly but sitting around wasn't likely to fix that.

When I was confident I could carry myself reasonably well, I walked out to join them.

There were only a few people about, mostly women, but they were all busy with errands. I suspect helping with the new campsite where all the men must be.

The few women wandering around gave me a smile or wave, but none actually came over. In a way I was glad no one was making a fuss about my near death encounter.

I faced the girls and asked to see a high block. They showed me and I moved them into a low block, followed by a middle. I got them into a pattern and watched their movements carefully, occasionally adjusting their grip on the weapon or their foot placement.

We kept at it while the sun rose above the trees. They were now working on stepping in and out of moves, trying to smooth out their transitions. I was kneeling on the floor scratching in marks when a shadow moved in front of me.

I looked up and smiled at John. He grinned back and held out a hand to help me up. I took it without any tricks but noticed he braced himself just in case.

Well good, at least he was learning.

I moved to show Lyle how to use the marks on the ground as guidelines and gave her the steps.

She did them once while I watched and I nodded and stepped back. John was already helping Ranya, and I noticed her blushing furiously from the attention, but she didn't miss a step. He stood back with me to watch and noticed the smirk on my face.

"What?"

"You seem to have an admirer" I whispered quietly, nodding at Ranya. She was busy focusing on her steps but a faint blush still coloured her cheeks.

He laughed and winked. "Yes well, I have that effect on people."

"Is that so? I hadn't noticed."

"Well,

may be immune but I can assure you no one else is. In fact, I'm sure one of these days you'll succumb to my charm and devastatingly good looks too."

"Well, perhaps when you actually acquire those qualities I will, but until then..." I trailed off seeing the mock offended look on his face. I laughed and shook my head at him.

"So, is this what you consider taking it easy? Out of bed already and not awake one day?" He said teasingly referring to the note.

"Well, at least I didn't go endanger myself while you were gone like you asked. It was quite a challenge resisting the temptation. I should get credit for that."

He rolled his eyes at me but I could see the smile winning out. "Yes, thank you so much for not trying to drown yourself or anything. And before you get any ideas I'm not much of a swimmer," He informed me.

"Very well, I'll just have to be more creative then."

He gave me an exasperated look and opened his mouth to reply when we were interrupted by a loud banging noise from behind.

The Last Dance (17)

Hey guys, thanks for the votes and becoming fans =)

Hope you like this chapter! I'm still trying to make it sound right, but I thought I'd get it out there anyway. And it has another blast from the past that hopefully will give you some insight on Celia... that's all I'm saying... ;D

PS. This chapter has a short flashback, which starts and ends with a set of three stars *** for those of you who can't see italics on your phones

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 17 - Changing Perspectives

I whirled around to see Lyle and Ranya in a furious battle. Their swords were clanging against each other with reckless abandon. I started getting nervous as they flailed their swords at each other, all structure forgotten. An experienced swordfighter could handle an inexperienced opponent but this was way different. They could get seriously hurt here. What had happened?

The girls were red in the face and shouting incoherently at each other. I didn't understand, they had been getting along perfectly all morning.

I looked at John in panic to see he had a grim look on his face.

"So, should we pull them apart? Or throw a buck of water over them?" He asked calmly.

My concern changed suddenly to anger and I narrowed my eyes. "No, just get me a stick."

He cocked an eyebrow but quickly found one and handed it to me.

I strode forward and stuck my 'weapon' between theirs to block their strikes. Then, in two quick movements I disarmed them, sending their swords pitching off to the sides.

They stood gaping in shock at me and I fixed them both with an angry glare.

"To be a knight requires chivalry, it takes honour and virtue, not just swinging a weapon around carelessly. You both would do well to remember that" I said icily.

I threw my stick down and stomped off to my tent furiously.

I felt shaken from their display and the confrontation. Fighting wasn't a game, it took proper training! Mostly I had been scared, terrified that they might really get hurt. They had been using proper weapons and everything.

I picked up my sword and started into a complex pattern dance to burn off my anger. I felt tears welling up in my eyes from being so overwhelmed.

"Celia, stop, you should be taking it easy" I heard John say quietly from behind me. I only sped up my movements,

keeping my back carefully turned away from him while I blinked to clear my eyes.

Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. I whirled around furiously and had my sword pointing at his throat before he could even register the action.

"Don't touch me."

He didn't look surprised, or even afraid, though his brows came together in frustration.

We glared at each other, neither moving, neither willing to concede. Without taking his eyes off mine he lifted a hand and closed it over my fist clutching the sword hilt. He firmly pulled my hand down and away from him.

"I thought we were past this."

He looked angry and a little hurt and I looked away, immediately feeling bad. I shouldn't have been taking my fear and anger out on him.

When I looked up again he was walking towards the tent flap, his body hunched over as if to shield himself from being vulnerable.

"John wait... I-I'm sorry..."

I looked away again feeling guilty and ashamed. Why couldn't things ever stay easy between us? They always came back to this.

We stood there awkwardly before John finally broke the silence.

"I have to admit to being a bit jealous outside, I thought that tone of voice was reserved specially for me," He said playfully, lightening the mood.

I felt my lips tugging up into a smile despite my swirling emotions.

"You're not mad?" I asked hesitantly.

"I suppose I should be... I must be going soft" He muttered while shaking his head.

"I don't know what happened out there, I just... snapped," I said feeling bad again.

"Don't feel bad, you were scared, no one blames you, not even the girls. I talked to them by the way, it's all sorted out."

I nodded glumly. That was all well and good but it didn't make me feel any better.

His hand came to rest on my shoulder tentatively and when I didn't slap it off he squeezed reassuringly.

"I'm going to tell everyone we'll be off soon." He said before leaving the tent.

I sighed feeling restless and still conflicted.

I picked my sword up from the ground, not even remembering having dropped it and went through another pattern, this one slower. I kept at it for awhile before switching to my left arm.

As I was going into a complex swing pain lanced up my arm and I dropped the sword with a gasp. I rubbed my sore wrist

and noticed the faint burn marks snaking around it. I grimaced and picked up the weapon again.

I started with the same move and again felt the pain course through me and the accompanying clatter of metal on the ground.

I bend to lift the sword off the ground yet again when a shadow fell over me.

"Even when you're hurt you refuse to give up" Said an amused voice from behind me.

I turned to see him leaning casually in the opening. The sun shone from behind, casting a halo of light around him. It caught his hair turning it the color of molten gold. The moment sparked a glimmer of recognition within me, I felt as if I'd lived this moment before... only much differently...

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I shook my head to clear the painful memories. That was years ago, and things had changed shortly after. Sure, John had continued to taunt me, but I wasn't weak anymore, I learned how to fight, with both the sword and other weapons.

I also learned how to take on bigger opponents, more experienced, less experienced, and men who had much more skill.

Thinking back on it now, without his harassment I might actually have given up. In my desire to prove him wrong I had worked harder than ever, determined to master any tool placed in my hand.

It was ironic, that the one thing he'd tried to keep me from only made me want it more. So while it was a painful memory, I wouldn't be where I was today without it. I shuddered, thinking how my skills had already saved both our lives at least once.

Things had been changing rapidly ever since my birthday, which now seemed a world away. Yes, we still fought, but it wasn't the same as before.

I absentmindedly fiddled with the bracelet that still adorned my wrist, glad that it had somehow managed to stay with me during the fire.

Silly of me to think that nothing had changed when clearly so much had.

His eyes back then, so filled with contempt now held a warmth and sparkle I'd never seen before.

The lips that had once always curled up into a sneer were now quick to smile.

And the anger, so easily ignited, had been replaced with a roll of the eyes, and even laughter.

It was like he was a whole new person. Or perhaps he was now just the person he never let me see before.

I couldn't know for sure, and yet his sudden kindness seemed so sincere, seemed to come so naturally it could only be genuine.

Maybe it was time to admit it was his true colors that now shone through. And after all, didn't I owe him the chance after he'd done the same for me so many nights ago?

Old habits must die hard, because whenever things seemed to be getting too comfortable I felt the inexorable need to push him away again.

Still, I hadn't forgotten how much I owed him, and I found I really did trust him, more than I was ready to admit.

The person I'd seen of late was no illusion, of that I was sure. And yet, I couldn't help but look up to reassure myself that his new demeanour was no trick of the light.

He wasn't there, and no wonder with how long I'd been staring into space, yet the old feelings, so fresh in my mind, nagged traitorously.

I instinctively reached for my sword, cursing my suspicious thoughts. Not feeling it in my scabbard, I recalled its earlier clatter to the ground and shifted my gaze downward.

Not there.

I heard a rustling behind me and turned to see my sword in Johns' hand, but it was no threat to me this time.

He was going through the same pattern of moves I'd been attempting before. I watched in silence as he finished the last move and began turning the blade over in his hand thoughtfully. When he caught my gaze he smiled ruefully and handed it back to me by the hilt.

I took it wearily though I had no reason to be. As I'd thought, his eyes held not a trace of the old contempt, but were rather filled with an intensity I could not describe.

I turned away feeling self conscious under his gaze and tried the move again with the same result as before.

As the sword clattered to the floor I glared at it accusingly and heard John chuckling once more. When I shifted my glare to him he tried unsuccessfully to turn his laugh into a cough and I let out a sigh of annoyance.

He bent down to pick the sword up and put it in my hand again. I frowned down at my wrist willing it not to let me down.

I felt John behind me, suddenly much closer than before, just as his hand came around and covered my own. He gently turned my wrist up and held it in place.

"There, try it now"

I looked at my arm dubiously, how would changing my holding position help? He sighed heavily and I felt his warm breath against my cheek, causing me to color slightly.

With his hand still over mine, he guided me through the move in slow motion.

"Try it" He repeated, letting go. The sword felt heavier without his support, but that was ridiculous wasn't it? I decided not to over think it and let my hand go through the motion unconsciously.

It then hit me that the sword was still in my hand, and not on the ground. Moreover, there had been no lance of pain. I turned to him in shock to see a satisfied smile playing across his lips.

"How...?"

He grinned at my sudden loss of words. "Something I learned from the villagers. Do you know they can fight even

with a broken wrist? The way I just showed you eliminates the need for you to twist your wrist at all when swinging"

"Impressive, what other useful things did you learn?"

"You'll have to wait until we have another duel to find out" He said mischievously.

"I suppose that's fine, you'll need all the advantage you can get" I teased.

"You're forgetting..." He leaned in close to whisper "...I had a good teacher."

He winked and walked out humming to himself.

I felt my face deepen in color and shook my head in annoyance but a smile won out despite my efforts to hold it back. He was still as much of a royal pain as ever, it was just different now. Much different.

The Last Dance (18)

Hi! First of all, thank you soooo much too all my new fans and for all the comments =)

Sorry for the long wait, but hopefully it's worth it!

And to make up for it the chapter is nice and long. Thanks for all your support!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 18 - Bickering

"Celia!"

I jumped at the sound of my name and rushed out of the tent to see that all the men we travelled here with were assembled. I was immediately surrounded, given pats on the back and some well wishes until I found myself facing Caleb.

"Well lass, I get this be where we part ways."

I nodded and my voice echoed his regret when I replied. "I hope the new settlement gets laid down quickly."

While a quiet man he had always seemed thoughtful and wise. He was definitely not one to make any rash decisions

like I so often found myself doing, and for that I had to respect him. Even when he thought us a danger to his people, he waited for the others to come back before deciding our fate, and I knew that now we'd gained his trust he would remain a good friend. This was one man I would happily have at my back in a fight.

"You two will be welcome here always" He said warmly.

"Thank you Caleb, I hope I'll get the chance to visit again."

We clasped arms and nodded a farewell to each other. I knew I'd miss him something terrible.

He smiled at me warmly once more before drifting off to the rest of the group.

Next I found myself facing Brice, who drew me forward and pulled me into a rough and quick hug. Surprised I hugged him back uncertainly. This was not the type of behaviour one would expect to see with a man like him.

But then again, I'd learned quickly that while he could growl like a bear and pull out the claws, he could also be more soft and kind than most.

"T'was an honor fightin' you lass, an I won't be forgetting I be owing you me life."

I smiled warmly, feeling a deep bond to this great bear of a man. "There are no debts between friends Brice, and either way I believe we're even owing to a certain fire not long ago." He grinned and ruffled my hair affectionately.

"I'll be expectin' a rematch one day lass."

I laughed. "I look forward to it." I knew I'd be missing him a great deal too, already he felt like a second father to me.

Brice gave me another quick hug and I looked over his shoulder at the others. John was watching my exchange with an annoyed look on his face, but when he met my gaze grinned sheepishly and went back to talking with Rory.

Now what was that about?

I turned back to Brice feeling puzzled, and told him to accompany Rory on his next trip to the castle.

"I surely will, what with the wonders ye been telling me of."

His eyes twinkled and we chatted on about what had been going on while I had been unconscious.

"Ay, the village be comin' along well, we set up one big house so's everyone has a roof over their heads. A fair nice bit 'o ground was cleared by the fire too so it's bigger now"

"I'm glad to hear it... were many... lost in the fire?"

The question had been at the back of my mind since I'd woken, but I hadn't the courage to ask it till now. Brice's face saddened slightly.

"A few lass, but ye can be glad to know all the women and children were saved, only a few men folk that didn't make it."

"Well that's something I suppose, but what of their families?"

"Oh, this settlement be used to losses such as that. When a man passes on the rest 'o the village take on the child as

their own. No need to be worrying about that lass."

"Well, that is a relief to hear" I smiled faintly.

I walked over to join Rory and a very fed faced John, catching just the end of what Rory was saying.

"...great match."

"What great match?" I asked. Rory opened his mouth to speak when John shot him a very pointed look.

Rory closed his mouth and I could see a bemused expression on his face as he and John stared at each other.

I glanced between them curiously wondering what was going on.

Rory winked at John and turned to me with a wide smile "Why that duel between ye and Brice, a great match it was. That will be one for the books. I can guarantee ye lass, next time ye be comin' in here everyone will be knowing yer name" He grinned proudly.

I looked suspiciously between them not quite believing the story.

John didn't look angry so much as embarrassed, which he had no reason to be over the fight. Unless he was embarrassed that I had to fight for his freedom?

Before I had a chance to pursue the matter the men, already rounded up again, called to Rory and he bid me a hasty farewell.

I gave them all a last goodbye and found that John had already started walking, and in the wrong direction no less.

I chuckled to myself and ran to catch up.

"You are aware we have to go to Newberry before home right? The journey would take over a week without our horses"

He stopped abruptly causing me to walk right into him and bounce backwards.

"Oof"

I stumbled and lost my balance falling backwards. John threw out a hand to catch my fall and grinned down at me.

"Didn't I say you'd fall for me eventually?"

I rolled my eyes at him "Yes that's it, I fell for you not

of you" I retorted sarcastically.

He shrugged and started off again, this time in the right direction. "Same difference."

"Please, they couldn't be more different" I said catching up.

"How so?"

I looked at him sceptically to see that his face was perfectly straight and curious. "Well, no wonder you think so highly of yourself if that's the 'logic' you follow" I muttered.

He bit the corner of his cheek to keep from smiling and I realized he'd only been joking with me. Of course, how gullible was I getting?

I punched him lightly in the arm and he pouted at me adorably. I felt my face warm slightly and looked away quickly.

Goodness, who knew he had such weapons in his arsenal? And here I thought women were the only ones who could pull such tricks.

He rubbed his shoulder as if it had actually hurt him. "Now, there's the old Celia 'sense of humour' I remember."

I grinned at him and speeded up to lead the way.

The sun was high up in the sky and it looked to be around two in the afternoon. Perfect, we should make it to the village by sunset.

We walked in silence for a while and I came to notice how nice the forest really was. I hadn't exactly had a chance to enjoy it much since I'd entered. First there was finding John, then saving him, then a duel, the fire, being unconscious... I'd never really had time to look around me to see the beauty.

Lush trees surrounded us, reaching forever higher to the sunlight. There were enough gaps between the upper reaches of foliage to let the sunlight shine through and light up the paths.

Exotic flowers grew in bunches and alone, in more colors than I could name, and shone brighter than any jewel.

The sounds of the bird's musical chirps could be heard all around accompanying the gentle sounds of the river we walked parallel to, and they always seemed to be in the perfect harmony.

I could easily see why so many people chose to live out here, though I knew their dangers were great. So quickly could this luscious beauty be turned into twisted columns of charcoal and ash. I shook my head to rid myself of the dark

thoughts and turned my attention to my companion, who looked deep in thought.

About what I wondered. We had been travelling in a comfortable silence for a while now and I suddenly felt the urge to break the stagnant air between us.

"So..." I ventured casting about for a topic. I recalled the suspicious conversation I'd heard just before leaving and the curiosity sprung up again.

"Do you want to tell me what you and Rory were talking about before we left?"

John quickly averted his face, making a point not to look at me, but not before I saw the color racing up to fill his cheeks. He quickened his pace to move ahead of me.

"Like he said, it was about the duel" He muttered back.

I knew he was lying. The question was what was so embarrassing he didn't want to tell me?

I had to lengthen my strides to catch up and caught his wrist to slow him down. He tried to tug it out of my grasp but wasn't really applying any pressure and just ended up pulling me along.

I tried to stand still to halt his movement but he didn't slow down and I was forced to catch up again. Getting annoyed I yanked his arm back making him spin around to face me.

"You're lying." I put my hands on my hips and cocked an eyebrow waiting for an answer. He looked down at me with an amused expression. I scowled up at him and a smirk spread across his face as he leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"Guess you'll never know will you?"

My mouth dropped open in shock and I felt my cheeks heating up. I felt a little flustered having him so close to me and hoped he would take it as anger.

He smirked at me one last time and continued walked. Please, like I would be put off that easily. I walked slowly letting the color ebb from my face.

When I felt relatively composed I ran back up to him and tugged on his arm lightly.

"Please tell me?" I tried to look up at him innocently but he wasn't buying it.

"Nope."

"Come on."

"Sorry."

"It can't be that bad."

"I didn't say it was."

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"Why do you need to know?"

"Curiosity?"

"That's hardly a good enough reason."

"Because you can't stand to see me upset at not knowing?"

"Actually it's kind of amusing."

"Because I could knock you out if you don't?"

"Then you'll really never find out."

"Because I could threaten it out of you?" I put my hand on my sword hilt for emphasis.

"You could, but you won't" He said matter of factly.

"You seem awfully sure of that."

"I am sure."

"You shouldn't be, I've done it before and I can do it again."

"Yes, but you won't now" He said confidently.

I was almost tempted to do it, just to prove him wrong, when in fact he was obviously right. I couldn't bring myself to do it, even as a joke. It made me realize yet again how much things had changed between us. That I was actually refraining from using violence...

"I'll annoy it out of you eventually so really you might as well tell me."

"Trust me, I'm not likely to get tired of you begging, it's such a rare occurrence that I intend to savour every moment of it."

"I am NOT begging."

"You most definitely are."

"Am not!"

"Are too."

"Not."

"Are."

"Not."

"Not."

"Are."

"Hah, so you admit it."

"I hate you."

"You're not exactly helping your case here." He said with a careless grin.

"Well what do you expect me to do? Sing your praises?"

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea actually."

"I was kidding John."

"You still suggested it, and how can I settle for anything less now?"

"Please tell me you're kidding."

"Here, I'll even help you out." He cleared his throat and I listened, horrified. "How about Charming? Dashing? Handsome?"

"Don't flatter yourself John" I scoffed.

"Now now, that's no way to get what you want..." He trailed off.

I shot him an annoyed look. "I'm not saying that."

"You are if you want to know."

I kept my mouth shut and glared at him.

"I can't hear you..."

I let out a noise of frustration. "Fine! You're..." I gulped. This was bound to be humiliating. Was it even worth it?

"Sorry didn't catch that."

I looked at him reproachfully. "You're... charming" I shuddered. This was already nauseating.

"And...?"

Stupid Prince, he was obviously enjoying this way too much. I could feel myself blushing, from both embarrassment and anger. "...dashing... and... ugh... handsome" I spit out quickly.

"And?"

I grimaced "...smart? ...Funny?"

"And?"

"Oh for goodness sake, what more do you want!"

He shrugged and smirked at me "I was just seeing how long you would go."

This time I really did have to keep myself from knocking him out. I swallowed back my retort and replied as calmly as I could. "Fine, I did it, now tell me."

"Um... no, I don't think I will."

"

But you

!" I screamed indignantly.

He only laughed. Laughed! The nerve! "Well, I didn't think you'd actually do it."

"Urgg, you're impossible."

"Well, there's no need to be upset, I'm sure I can think of another way for you to convince me, unless you have another suggestion...?"

"Oh no, I'm never doing anything for you ever again! I hope you get attacked by a bear just so I can sit back and laugh!"

"Now

is not very nice."

We bickered on like this for over an hour with John getting increasingly smug while I got more and more frustrated.

Finally reaching my limit I stalking off to a nearby tree trunk and sat down, crossing my arms with a pout.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me." Childish, I know, but he wouldn't just leave me and keep going would he? And the more he refused, the more I wanted to know, though by now the effort hardly seemed worh it.

He turned to face me and cracked up. "You can't be serious."

I turned my face away defiantly and started feeling embarrassed. How did I get myself into this? So long pride.

I watched him from the corner of my eye to see a bemused look on his face as he walked over to me. Soon he was close enough that I could only make out his legs in front of me, and then he was squatting down so our eyes were level. Or would be if I turned around, but now we were close again and I had another reason to keep my face to the side.

He chuckled at my stubbornness and lifted a hand to turn my face towards him.

"Really Cece?" He teased.

Keeping my pout in place I leaned forward until there was only an inch of space between us.

"Pleeeease?" I whined, drawing out the sound.

His teasing expression disappeared and a look passed across his eyes, but it was too fast for me to place. His face flushed adorably and he quickly got up putting space between us.

He shook his head and when he faced me again had a mischievous look on his face. Uh oh, that couldn't be good.

Before I could register what was happening, he had swooped down and I suddenly found myself in the air. I let out a gasp as he threw me over his shoulder and started walking forward again as if I didn't weigh a thing.

I pounded on his back, but couldn't put any force into it since I was swaying rather dizzyingly.

Pleased with his joke, he seemed to be too busy laughing to even notice anyway.

I crossed my arms and waited for him to calm down. I started muttering curses under my breath which only made him laugh harder. Honestly it had to have been five minutes by now, was he ever going to let me down? I pounded on his back again with no result.

"John this isn't funny, put me down."

"Actually, I happen to think this is extremely funny, but since you asked so nicely, no."

I let out a noise of frustration. "Please put me down?" This is what I get for teasing him.

"Do you promise to keep walking?"

"Yes." Anything to get down from here.

"Good, now say it with your fingers uncrossed."

How did he know?

"Alright yes, I promise, happy? Can you let me down now?"

He chuckled and gently placed me on my feet.

I took a step forward and wobbled, still dizzy from being half upside down. I took another unsteady step and John started laughing yet again, not even bothering to help.

I glared at him. "I think I liked you before you started trying to be funny" I stated matter of factly.

He grinned "Well I guess you should have thought of that before coming to rescue me."

He started walking again and I grudgingly followed. I still wasn't ready to give up though, I wanted to know. And since

I had already gone to such great embarrassing lengths it was only fair to tell me. Whatever it was couldn't be as bad as me losing my dignity could it?

I was lagging behind and ran to catch up.

Fine, I still had one trick left, though I was hesitant to use it... but I was desperate.

I linked my arm through his to get his attention and his gaze moved to me warily, though he didn't stop walking.

I smiled up at him innocently but he kept his mouth firmly shut. Still, I knew I was getting to him from the color rising in his cheeks.

I was finding I enjoyed teasing him, it was so easy to make him blush, and I found it rather cute how innocent he was... not that I'd ever tell him.

I stepped in front of him and stopped walking. He grimaced, but stopped walking as well and stared past me, not making eye contact.

I smirked at him and he crossed his arms defiantly.

"It can't be that bad John, for all the trouble you're going through to hide it" I teased.

He glanced at me but didn't say anything.

Before I had a chance to think about it too much, I draped my hands around his neck.

His eyes widened and he started blushing furiously, while his hands went seemingly automatically to rest on my waist. The embrace we were in now reminded me of our dance

lesson so many nights ago and I suddenly felt self conscious.

I didn't want to think too much of it, since things had gone all wrong that night, but this was somehow different. Maybe it was the bright day that made it seem less intense and so much more comfortable.

I felt a pang of guilt that I was only doing this to make him tell me something, but no, it wasn't just that, it felt like it was... real. A real moment. An almost intimate moment. Between me and... John?

I couldn't wrap my head around that idea and instead focused on him. He looked bewildered and flushed, but no longer embarrassed. In fact, other than a little confusion he seemed perfectly confident in our near embrace. It was almost unsettling.

Almost.

I smiled sweetly while leaning in close to him and had the satisfaction of seeing his face flood abruptly with color. He gave up trying to hide the blush and met my eyes with a resigned look on his face.

"Now will you tell me?"

He looked down at me cautiously and I felt his grip tighten on my waist. "Fine, but don't overreact."

I scoffed at him, please, why would I overreact?

He stared at me uncertainly a moment longer, as if trying to gage what my reaction might be.

Well, we wouldn't know until he told me. But either way, whatever he was looking for he seemed to have found because he didn't let go of me to run behind a tree or anything for protection.

"He said.. um.. that uh.."

His nervousness was back and he couldn't look me in the eye anymore. His face became, if possible, even more red, and he took a deep breath before looking at me again.

"He said..."

The Last Dance (19)

Okay, yes, I know the 'cliffhanger' was painfully obvious, but in fact it had another purpose... to distract you from thinking about what her reaction would be hehe. Unless you did think that far ahead, in which case kudos =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Recap:

_____

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"He said..."

Chapter 19 - Babysitting?

"Hesaidwewereagreatmatch"

It came out in a rush but I still caught it all. Rory thought we were a great match. Me and John. John and me.

"Oh."

He was regarding me cautiously, like a volcano that might erupt at any moment.

Really, I wasn't nearly as volatile as he was, how ironic. He was probably surprised that I hadn't immediately pulled away, and truth be told, I didn't understand why I was so calm either. Perhaps it hadn't really sunk in yet.

Me and

?

I felt laughter bubbling up and let out a small giggle.

John and

?

I laughed some more, and now John was looking at me as if I'd snapped, but I noticed that neither of us had let go yet. As laugher continued to spurt out I was the first to break our

stance to clutch my stomach. John started running his hands through his hair, probably wondering what to do.

"You and me? That's absurd, we can't go five minutes without wanting to rip each other's throats out."

My laughter stopped as fast as it came when I looked up to see his reaction and was surprised to see that it was confused. Did he really think...?

No, there was just no way.

"I mean, you can't possibly think he's right?"

I felt an edge of hysteria to my query. Sure, we were getting along now, but it was different out here so isolated from real life. We'd never last. Not to mention I didn't want to be with anyone, much less someone who's been my enemy for most of my life ...right? And we'd only barely figured out how to be friends, anything more would be ridiculous.

His lips pulled up into a teasing smile, but it didn't quite seem to reach his eyes.

"Of course not, us? It's completely absurd."

He chuckled and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, "And don't go telling anyone, but I believe we've gone a few hours now without any untoward violence, and I can assure you I haven't felt the desire to do you any bodily damage."

I scoffed. "Speak for yourself I've been sorely tempted to run you through with a sword since we left the settlement."

I walked forward and heard his chuckle behind me; relief filled me again that it was sincere. I probably just imaged

that slight catch in his tone, I thought, as he fell in step with me.

Yes, that was definitely it; I pushed any nagging doubts out of my mind. It was only a matter of time anyway and we would be back to our usual antics. Well, I hoped not quite back to usual, but we wouldn't remain this friendly for long. Oddly, the thought made me feel a little sad. I shook it off and continued forward, there was no use getting upset over it now.

We walked through a set of trees and stumbled out of the forest abruptly with Newberry spread before us. We were just outside the city limits and looked down upon the small town below us. The sight was refreshing after all those days among the same trees and constant scenery.

"Well, it seems we passed our time together rather efficiently" John remarked.

I nodded my agreement and strode excitedly forward, holding out an arm when John moved to follow.

He cocked an eyebrow. "You're supposed to be at the castle, remember?"

"Oh… you're not going to leave me alone here all night are you?" He asked hesitantly.

I smiled. "Don't be silly, I'll send Sir Corry back here to sneak you into town. Though you might be stuck here until it gets darker."

He nodded absently, already in his own thoughts and I shrugged and moved out of the line of trees.

I checked to make sure no one was about before walking down to the village. Just to be on the safe side I first crept along the tree line until I reached the main road and followed the path into the village. No one would know I came from the forest that way.

I took a moment to reorient myself and turned my steps towards where I thought Sir Corry's home was. It was nearing sunset and the sky was already a swirl of burnt orange and dark purple. Luckily for me, there were very few people roaming the streets so I didn't draw any undue attention.

I looked down the street nonchalantly hoping no one would assume me to be lost and offer their help. The best thing would be to get in and out unnoticed. I scanned the houses lining the street to find the one I needed. Surely it couldn't be that hard to find.

I knew that as a Knight of the Realm, Sir Corry's house would have some kind of identifying plaque; it was only a matter of finding it.

The houses lining the street looked cozy and welcoming. Each had a small fire build up for the chilly night that could be seen through the window and lit up the streets in the fast approaching dark. Clothes were hung out in lines between properties and fluttered gently in a breeze too soft for me to feel.

One house stood out among the rest with a wooden shield adorning the front of the house. As I got closer I made out the coat of arms of a sword plunged partway into the ground and a rising sun in the foreground; I smiled, it was the realms' Coat of Arms.

Having found the right house I walked up the dirt path to the door. I knocked twice and waited for someone to answer. A petit woman with smiling eyes answered the door and appraised me with surprise.

I wondered how I must look from her point of view; a girl in men's clothes that were probably rumpled from nights in the forest, and a scabbard to boot. Not something you see every day I reckon.

I cleared my throat. "Pardon the interruption madam, but is this the residence of Sir Corry?"

She smiled warmly "Tis indeed dearie, may I ask what be your business with him?" She asked politely.

"Yes, he did the great favour of looking after a pair of horses for me..." I trailed off as realization lit her eyes.

"Ah, you must be Lady Celia then, I've heard many a story of you dearie" She added with a wink. I blushed wondering what stories Sir Corry had told her. Suddenly I found myself being ushered into the house like I was an old friend coming to visit.

"You make yourself at home dearie, and I'll fetch that husband of mine."

I nodded my thanks and looked around. It was a quaint home with tan walls and tasteful furniture and trinkets littering the shelves.

I stepped further into the room she'd left me in front of and explored a bit. A canvas hung above a glowing fireplace and depicted a man and woman, presumably the Knight and his lady.

I looked closer and saw the resemblance to the two people I'd just met. They looked younger in the drawing, and gazed into each other's eyes lovingly. The artist had done a stunning job, capturing the moment perfectly. I felt a pang, wondering what it must be like to feel that way about someone and have the feelings returned. I found myself moving closer and marvelled at the intense emotions that a stick of charcoal had managed to produce.

I smiled wistfully and reluctantly looked away from the drawing to the rest of the room. An oak table sat in front of the fire with couches on either side. In the corner of the room was a pile of discarded toys.

The women, I'd forgotten to ask her name, still hadn't come back, but I wasn't alone for long.

Two girls came running excitedly into the room and I wondered what the cause of it was.

Apparently it was me.

They came to an unsteady halt in front of me and looked up at me in admiration.

"Hello?"

They stayed unnaturally quiet for a few seconds still staring up at me in wonder. It was somewhat unsettling. In unison they screeched, causing me to step back in surprise.

"It her!"

"You're the one daddy was saying..."

"It's Celee Jenny, it's her!"

Before I had processed what was going on, two excited five year olds had grabbed an arm each and were tugging me down the hall. I fumbled along cooperatively since I didn't really see any other option.

I'll be the first to admit I didn't know how to deal with kids this young. The girls I'd sometimes taught had always been at least ten years or older, so this was a bit overwhelming.

To my great relief I was released when we entered what I assume was the play room. Toys were scattered about but something seemed off. A large open space had been cleared in the middle with various fake weapons divided into two piles. Around the edges, discarded and ignored, were dolls, teacups and an assortment of accessories.

"Daddy told us all 'bout you" One of the girls said while jumping up and down.

"We're going to be just like you!"

"Daddy said when we get bigger we can go to the castle and train!"

"And we're gonna be the best and beat everyone like you!"

They ran into the middle of the room and pulled swords made out of twigs strung together out of the piles. They started circling each other and making lunges at each other.

I smiled encouragingly and corrected their stance or the way they held their weapons. It was natural to me making these adjustments since I did it so often for other children.

"You've been quite the inspiration for the girls." I straightened from my crouch and turned with a smile towards Sir Corry.

"I'm flattered truly, but what on earth could you have said to so inspire them?" I asked ruefully.

Sir Corry only laughed and shook his head. "Now, any lass who can best a full knight is worth looking up to" He said with a wink.

"Not mentioning of course your rescue mission, which I take it, was successful?" He said the last part quietly so only I could hear.

I nodded. "He's at the edge of the forest waiting."

"You are both welcome here for the night of course."

"I'm happy to accept your hospitality, it's been a long time since I've slept indoors and I've found myself missing it."

He chuckled. "Aye, it's been several days now since you dropped the horses into my hands. I won't deny I was getting worried."

"There were some... unexpected diversions along the way, and surely my own parents have worked themselves up into a frenzy of worry, not to mention the King... he must be frantic by now" I said worriedly.

I had almost forgotten all the people who waited for us back home. After all, how long could the King convince the people that John was simply gaining field experience? That story would only work for so long, and if I knew the King, he would be resorting to drastic measures soon enough.

"Fear not, the King hasn't done anything drastic yet" He said reading my thoughts.

"But I will be wanting to hear of these 'diversions' as you say" He said with a twinkle in his eyes.

I smiled "I suppose a story is the least I can do for your help."

He shook his head "It is what any Knight would do. And really, it's I who should be thanking you considering it was under my watch the Prince disappeared in the first place."

"I'm sure all will be forgiven when the Prince is finally returned."

He nodded "I hope that's true, but for now arrangements must be made. I'll go fetch the Prince and settle you two in for the night. If you'll just tell Marie what supplies you have left she'll be sure to get you what you need so you won't need to make any trips to the village."

I thanked him again for his kindness and looked at the rest of the household. Marie stood by the door and kissed Sir Corry's cheek as he passed her. I averted my eyes, allowing them privacy and smiled.

"Now then dearie, where's that pack of yours?"

I handed it to her and she bustled out of the room leaving me alone with the kids again. I shifted about uncertainly as they looked at me expectantly. Was I supposed to entertain them?

***

Not five minutes and I felt completely in over my head. This was exhausting! How did mothers keep up with even one child? Much less two!

Perhaps I'd never given enough credit to the young ladies at court who'd surely been trained in the art of child care. It seemed to me an even greater challenge than wielding a sword!

The girls pranced around me with a limitless supply of energy, constantly vying for my attention and asking questions in such rapid succession I hadn't the time to even process, much less answer them.

Never had I felt so at a loss. I really had no idea what to do. Was there some essential trick I was missing? Some secret to tame these wild kids? I was baffled and getting increasingly more frazzled by the minute.

I focused on taking deep breathes and tried to evaluate the situation, yet it didn't become any clearer. The girls seemed unconcerned that I was only standing rooted in the same spot, completely unresponsive. It was at if my body had shut down all function. The noise was so deafening that I noticed at once when it ceased and wondered what had caused it.

I turned slowly to the entrance of the room and saw John standing there with an amused look on his face. He must have noticed my expression of shear panic because he burst out laughing the second I caught his eye.

A pair of loud shrieks then filled the air and the girls literally started sprinting to John. I watched on in shock as he knelt down and caught each of them with an arm around the waist.

"John's back!!"

"Hurrah!"

"Jenny, Abby, how are you two? Training hard I see?" He said indicating the practice swords.

Jenny wiggled out from his hold and ran over to pick up a cardboard sword and proudly held it up for him to see.

"It's mine shword" She made a swipe with it and John started clapping. I covered my mouth to hide a smile.

"Well, Lady Jenny, you obviously know what you're doing. May I have the honour of a duel?"

She nodded excitedly and Abby rushed to hand him her fake sword. I stood back to watch and had to admit to feeling quite impressed with his ability to handle them. What's more, he actually seemed to be enjoying himself.

They had a mock duel and a few chuckles escaped me to see the dramatic expressions on John face as he pretended to fight and, of course, lose. He bowed low to Jenny, saluting her as the winner and she squealed her excitement and launched herself into him again.

Taken by surprise he lost his balance and fell over backwards with the girl landing on his stomach. Tears fell from his eyes from laughing so hard and Abby ran to join her sister on his stomach.

He manoeuvred into a sitting position with each of the girls on his lap.

"Well, how about a story for the winner?"

The girls nodded excitedly, their attention riveted to John while I watched on in awe. He handled them so well when I didn't last even a few minutes! And the peace! They were utterly silent, hanging on his every word. John looked up just

in time to see me gaping and I quickly shut my mouth. He chuckled and shot me a wink before leaning down to whisper something to the girls.

I looked on in alarm as the girls jumped up from their seats and rushed over to me. Sending John a scathing look I let them each grab hold of an arm and pull me forward to sit across from him.

He smirked at me, obviously amused by how baffled I was.

Jenny went back to sit in his lap while Abby claimed mine. I uncertainly draped an arm around her waist, mimicking John's position. She immediately snuggled closer to me and I found myself smiling unconsciously.

"And now for the story. Once upon a time..."

***

Fourty minutes later the girls were both asleep in our arms and breathing softly. I looked down at them fondly, liking them much better while they innocently slept. Looking like this it was hard to imagine how hyper they had been less than an hour ago.

"How did you do that?" I asked

"Do what?"

"This" I said taking in the sleeping kids "How are you so good with them?"

He only shrugged "It doesn't take much with kids, you just have to show them you're paying attention and they're happy."

I shook my head in disbelief. "There must be some trick I'm missing."

He laughed, "Trust me, there isn't."

I looked at him dubiously but he merely shook his head at me while holding back a smile. He stood up carefully and deposited Jenny on the couch, and then took Abby from me and did the same.

He sat back down next to me and crossed his legs.

"You're still trying to figure out what the trick is aren't you?" He asked in amusement.

I nodded, choosing to ignore the fact that he was making fun of me "In only five minutes I was at my wits end! Then you came in here and had them hanging on your every word. There has to be a trick" I said stubbornly.

"Well... I suppose it's possible they just like me better than you."

"They do not! I'm the reason they were even playing with swords" I instantly argued.

He tried to keep a straight face but a smile won out. "I'm pretty sure they like

better, seeing as I actually paid attention to them, which really is the only 'trick' you're trying to figure out. Anyway there's no need to be jealous" He added with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Jealous of what exactly?"

"That I was paying more attention to them than you. But really, if you felt left out all you had to do was ask. I'd be

more than happy to tell you a story too."

I opened my mouth to give a rude retort but was cut off when I felt his arm wrap around my waist. I let out a gasp as he pulled me onto his lap, keeping his arm firmly around me so I couldn't move.

I felt myself blushing furiously. What an embarrassing position to be in.

I struggled futilely against his strong hold.

"This is getting old you know!" I said in exasperation.

He laughed "Maybe for you it is, but I still happen to find it amusing. Why? Aren't you comfortable?"

Of course I was who wouldn't be? But that didn't mean I could stay here.

I froze mid struggle when I felt his breath on my neck "Now, what story do you want to hear?"

I could hear the smile in his voice and cursed myself for letting him have this effect on me. Not that he knew it, but still, there had to be a way of getting out of this position without compromising my integrity like I seemed to be doing so often.

I stopped my struggling for a moment to answer his question.

"How about the one where the annoying Prince gets attacked by wild animals?" I asked scathingly.

"Are you sure? I prefer the one where the rude village wench falls in love with the charming Prince and they live happily

ever after."

"Are you calling me a wench?!" I asked fiercely, ignoring the rest of what he'd said.

"Now, who said I was talking about you? Unless of course you're admitting you

in love with me" He said smugly.

"I--" A click from a door closing sounded and I bit back my response and listened carefully.

That was when I heard the approaching footsteps.

The Last Dance (20)

Hey, so this chapter is really short, but that's because it sort of came out of nowhere. I hadn't meant for most of this part to really be there but it seemed to practically write itself and then I had to keep it. Sooo... I hope you like it, because I know I do =) Just think of it as a little bonus, and the next chapter will be back to the usual flow of things.

P. S. I love this song, and I hope it fits with the chapter... BUT wait till you finish the chapter before listening to it!!! and more importantly check out the lyrics... you'll understand why AFTER you red the chapter =) ---------->

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

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still, there had to be a way of getting out of this position without compromising my integrity like I seemed to be doing so often.

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Chapter 20 - Storytelling

"John they're coming!" I hissed quietly.

"So?" He inquired.

"So, let go!" I said panicked.

"No thanks, I'm fine like this."

Now I could hear voices down the hall. They would be here any minute!

Thinking fast I tried elbowing John in the stomach, but missed since I was in such an awkward position. I only succeeded in loosening his grip a little, but it was enough.

I scrambled up and knelt down in front of the kids sleeping forms on the couch. I made sure to keep my face carefully turned away from the door so no one could see how red I was and start asking questions. I fought to stay calm and not listen to John's quiet chuckling from where I'd left him on the floor.

By the time the Knight and his lady entered the room I felt more composed and even managed to pull off looking surprised at their entrance.

John hadn't moved from where he was sitting, the only difference being that he was leaning back on his arms

casually. Ugh, how was he so calm all the time? He didn't even look slightly embarrassed.

Sir Corry took one look at the sleeping children and exchanged a smile with his wife. He swooped down, taking Abby from in front of me while John got up to pick up Jenny, purposely nudging me as he passed.

"I hope you two aren't too tired to stay up for a bit, tell us about this adventure of yours?" Sir Corry asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

I nodded happily as the men left the room to deposit the children to bed. Maria motioned for me to follow her and we ended up back in the living room I'd first explored.

She bustled around preparing four cups of tea and handed one to me with a smile. She took one for herself and settled down into the couch.

I decided to sit on the floor closer to the warmth of the fire and leaned back against the couch. I closed my eyes, blissfully savouring this rare moment of perfect quiet, and held the cup close to my face so that the steam washed over me.

When I opened my eyes again I noticed Maria regarding me curiously. Her eyes skimmed over my clothes and when she met my eyes gave me a bemused smile.

"What?" I asked curiously.

I felt embarrassed under her calculating gaze and afraid that she disapproved of the way I dressed like so many court ladies. It surprised me that her opinion mattered when I'd only just met the woman.

"You know dearie, most girls spend their whole lives grooming and learning ta please men so's to attract a good husband. And here ye are, dressed for practicality instead of beauty and manage to snag a Prince"

I felt my face instantly go red. "Oh he's not, that is

not... umm... I... we're friends... I think...

friends... if that." I added as an afterthought.

I looked up to her eyes again and saw the laughter shining through them.

"Well, if that be the way he looks at all his 'friends'..."

She trailed off mid sentence at the sound of footsteps coming back down the stairs.

I frowned, wishing I could ask what she meant but the men had just entered the room and I couldn't bring it up.

I raised my knees to my chest and brought the cup closer to my face, peering at them over the rim of the cup.

Sir Corry took a mug and settled next to his wife on the couch. They exchanged only a look, but I recognized it as the same one captured so beautifully in the drawing above the fireplace. It was full of an unspoken mutual love and adoration.

Again I felt like I was somehow intruding and looked to my right where John was settling down beside me on the floor. He gave me a cheerful smile and turned back to face our hosts.

The crackling fire beside me caused shadows to dance across his face and I felt myself lost in their movement.

They made his hair glitter like gold and caressed every curve of his face. I had a strange urge to trace those lines with my hand but instead clutched my cup more tightly. Those were not thoughts I should be having.

His laughter woke me from my daze and I reluctantly tore my gaze away and focused on the tea before me. I took a hastily sip and burned my tongue slightly from the searing liquid. Still, I was grateful for the burning sensation that gave me something other than him to focus on.

Belatedly I realized I was being addressed and looked up feeling embarrassed.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I drifted off for a bit there, what did you say?"

Sir Corry chuckled and repeated himself. "I was wondering how you managed to trace John when the trail was already so old."

I started earlier, talking about how I'd first convinced the King to let me go after him alone before he sent an army out to drag him back. I remembered those tense first days well, how I was driven by sheer determination and would have ripped apart the whole forest looking for him.

I felt myself quickly shift into the easy rhythm of talking, letting myself get into the story, reliving each event as it happened.

I gave the full account of what I'd done while everyone listened silently. I modified the bit about finding John, leaving out the fight we'd had and skipped to when he'd

been captured. I talked about my rush through the forest and leaving the horses in Sir Corry's care and then the return trip to find John again.

I left out all of the personal interactions between John and myself, though they played themselves vividly in my mind.

While telling my part of the story I saw in my mind how we'd gradually moved past our hated from one another.

As the memories unfolded around me I noticed that it was the worst situations that had brought us together. I finished my telling when we left from the new settlement and arrived at Newberry, trailing off into the silence.

Sir Corry and Maria looked towards us with awe while John had a faint smile on his face.

He wasn't looking at me, but I knew he was remembering the tenuous start to our friendship as well. I had felt his eyes on me, gauging my reaction whenever I skipped over the times we'd formed our bond.

John was first to break the silence when Sir Corry switched his attention to him. He began the story all over again, starting from when he'd escaped them and brushed over the parts that I'd already talked about, focusing instead on his own experiences.

I felt my eyes wonder over to him and watched his lips form each word of the story. He talked about his first nights in the forest and his trouble making a fire.

I looked away to hide a smile, remembering my scepticism when I saw him make one so easily. It must have taken a lot of practice.

He took my lead and mentioned briefly that he hadn't wanted to come back with me and had walked off instead, only to be caught by the trap.

I knew our argument was fresh in his mind, as it was in mine, by the grimace on his face when he talked about it.

I almost winced, remembering the harsh judgements I'd made, driven by anger and confusion at his cold behaviour.

While we'd talked a lot since becoming closer, that was a conversation we always skirted around, avoiding it like it had never happened. It was still a mystery to me why he'd been so mad.

He then told them about how he was led blindly through the forest and how he'd had to come up with different ways of dropping buttons. This got a laugh out of Sir Corry, and again I marvelled that he'd come up with such a good idea in the heat of the moment.

I was grateful when he followed my example and left out the parts where we were alone, but I saw the subtle changes in his expression as they came to mind, just as they had for me.

His eyes took on a faraway look and a faint smile brushed across his face, which could only be noticed from my close proximity.

I knew whatever thoughts were in his mind must be the cause of the smile since it certainly contradicted the details he was saying out loud.

I felt myself tuning out while he talked about my duel with Brice as I remembered what had happened after...

How he'd been on the verge of tears for fear of what might happen to me. That look of horror in his eyes when he saw the cut on my arm, reminding him of what had been at stake...

And, of course, the feel of his lips brushing over mine, so soft I wasn't sure even now that I hadn't imagined it.

My eyes were drawn there now, back to the movement, though the sound escaping them eluded me.

They were full for a man; surprisingly delicate without looking feminine. Most often these days they were pulled up into a lazy grin that he seemed to make unconsciously.

Other times, like when he wanted to annoy me, they formed that familiar smirk I'd grown so used to, and yet it no longer had the ability to infuriate me.

And sometimes, I'd get the rare smile I'd never known he had, the one that showed up when I least expected it and made me catch my breath every time.

Rory's words came unbidden to my mind; that we would make a great match, and for this one moment, in the glowing light of the fireplace, it didn't seem so ridiculous.

The Last Dance (21)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 21 - Like a Lady

Captivated as I was by the movement of his lips I noticed when they stopped and blinked in confusion. Had I been occupied by my own thoughts long enough to miss the whole story?

Another silence had encompassed the room and John's gaze drifted to me. I didn't turn away like I usually would at being caught staring and gave him a faint smile. There was no teasing smirk like I expected, he only returned the smile, though his seemed laced with something more... almost disappointment.

I turned away suddenly to stifle a yawn, but my action didn't go unnoticed. Sir Corry chuckled from his seat and got up. John followed next and offered me a hand up. I put my teacup in his outstretched hand instead and used the couch to pull myself up. He just shook his head at me, grinning.

I shot him a smirk and turned to our hosts. Sir Corry had his arm around his wife's shoulder and they watched us with smiles on their faces.

"Well, I think that's enough stories for one night, you two will have to get an early start tomorrow."

Sir Corry and Maria headed out of the room, each motioning for us to follow as they split in different directions.

I warily turned my steps to follow Maria when John caught my wrist. I turned around to give him a questioning look but his eyes were averted to the ground.

"Well, goodnight then" He murmured.

He stepped closer and pressed a kiss to my cheek, coming away blushing. Before I could even process what had happened he was halfway down the hall. I lifted my fingers to the spot in shock, hoping that my sleep addled brain hadn't made that up.

I shook my head and turned slowly to catch up with Maria. Just when I think I know where we stand he has to go and confuse me again. During the day he acts playful and annoying but at night he's suddenly intense. As if the dark makes things that we'd never do in the light okay. And then the sun rises and everything from the night is brushed away as if it never happened. I sighed. I was far too tired to try figuring this out now.

I yawned loudly and barely managed to keep my eyes open until we reached the room I was staying in. With a mumbled thanks to Maria, I flopped down on the bed, relishing the soft mattress beneath me before I passed out in exhaustion.

***

The sun beat me getting up the next morning, but not by more than an hour or two. I stumbled out of the room and

tried to find my way to the kitchen, where I assumed Maria would be.

Obviously I hadn't been paying attention to my surroundings the night before because it took me a few wrong turns to find it. A sad thing considering the house was only modest in size.

When I finally pushed my way into the kitchen Maria was standing in front of the table packing things into my bag. A cup of tea steamed beside her. I smiled and looked around curiously wondering where everyone else could be.

"They're already gone."

I shifted my gaze back to her. "My husband and the Prince," She clarified. "They left just before the sun rose so's to get outta town without drawin' attention. Took the horses with 'em to and had a few things to take care of. You're ta meet them when you're ready."

I nodded my understanding. "Thank you again for everything ma'am, I suppose I'll head out now."

"Oh, no, not yet you aren't."

I raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I'll not be sendin a guest of mine out of the house lookin like she rolled around in the ashes" She said sternly.

I blushed realizing what condition my clothes were in. They were all caked with dirt and covered in grass stains, and yes, probably ashes too from the forest fire.

She laughed and led me through the house to a large bathroom with a steaming bath set up and towels piled on

the side. Maria measured me with her eyes and nodded. "You're about my size dearie, get rid of those rags and I'll round up some of my own things for ye to wear."

"Oh, it's fine really; the castle is only two days ride away."

"Nonsense, that's no way for a lady to be dressed, and not especially in the company of a Prince!"

She seemed positively scandalized at the idea that I would be caught in John's presence in this state even though I'd spend days with him like this already. I hid a smile, it hardly mattered how I dressed anyway, John wouldn't be looking at

that way. Still, even with only a few hours with this woman I knew better than to argue.

It felt good washing away the grime from the last few nights and I had a new appreciation for being clean. Wrapped in a towel I looked down in dismay at the clothes Maria had picked out for me. Needless to say they were not to my usual taste, but I had little choice and grudgingly slipped them on.

Cringing I walked towards the mirror afraid of what might meet my eyes. How silly, I could run into a raging fire without a moment's hesitation, but was afraid of being dressed like a right and proper girl?

I let out a breath and stepping forward to see my reflection. I paused and studied myself critically.

The peasant blouse fit well, too well, hugging the curves I usually covered up and making me feel self conscious. The sleeves reached just above my elbows and had a thin lace trim that matched the one on the neckline, which was a little low for my comfort.

The skirt, which truly cause me to cringe, hit mid calf and swirled around my legs when I walked. The rest of my legs were covered by the supple leather boots that reached halfway up my calves. I was glad they had avoided the damage the rest of my clothes had seen. No way would I have walked out of here in the dainty slippers women wore these days, the skirt was bad enough.

Although not even an inch of skin was bared I felt more exposed than I ever had and wished desperately the material would lie flat against my legs. This would make riding problematical.

Oh no, and John would see me like this. I groaned out loud, I would

live this one down. He'd be teasing me about dressing like an actual girl for the rest of my life.

Great. Just great.

With a sigh I made my way downstairs wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. Maria was busy trying, unsuccessfully, to restrain the girls but gave up when she heard me enter. She turned to face me and a smile lit up her face as she nodded approvingly.

"Well, I see they fit you alright, though I must admit to bein' a bit jealous they flatter you so much better 'n me. Oh to be young and beautiful."

I blushed at the compliment feeling flattered. Beautiful was not a word I heard often in regards to me, outside of family that is. I usually preferred the lose clothing that covered up my shape and more importantly was comfortable and suitable for training. Still, it was sweet that she cared so much about how I looked.

"Yes, now you look like a girl meant to be escorting a Prince if ye catch my meaning dearie."

I didn't, and my forehead crinkled in confusion, but she didn't elaborate.

I took my bag which she had refilled with supplies and also two other sets of clothes that she insisted were too small on her and that I would look 'lovely' in. Her words, not mine.

I knew she was just trying to get me into wearing more feminine clothes, and once again I knew better than to refuse. It's not like she would know if I didn't wear them.

After wishing her a last farewell I headed out. The sun still hung low in the sky, but a few people had wandered outdoors, getting an early start to their day. While we had the whole day ahead of us, I wanted to use it to get as far as possible so that we might have a more leisurely pace tomorrow.

On the way out of town I saw Sir Corry who nodded at me then halted in his tracks surprised.

"Why Miss Celia, for a moment I didn't even recognize you, I hope Maria didn't do anything drastic to get you into that."

I could tell by the twinkle in his eyes that he was only teasing, but I blushed all the same. I muttered incoherently and he smiled.

"Well, I'm sure Johnathan will be surprised, he won't know what hit him." He chuckled to himself and I opened my mouth to ask what he meant but he had already started on his way.

What did he mean John wouldn't know what hit him? Was he referring to the fact that John would torture me relentlessly for being dressed like this? No, he was much to kind for that. I sighed in frustration, why did I feel like I was missing something important here?

I walked the rest of the way out of town before doubling back to the tree line and edging slowly along. I kept my steps light so that John wouldn't catch me unawares. I wanted to prolong the humiliation for as long as I could, and anyway, I was a little nervous about seeing him.

When he came into sight I saw that he was sitting on the ground and leaning back against a tree. He was also reading, obviously a book he's taken out from one of my bags. He had a fresh set of clothes on and was freshly shaven, returning his usual boyish appearance. His hair was damp and in its usual tousled mess that looked effortlessly adorable.

I felt silly standing there staring and, not wanting him to catch me, I traced my steps back a few paces until I was out of sight. I walked back much louder this time so that he would hear my approach.

When I saw him again the book had been put away and he was pulling himself up. He yawned and spared me a quick glance before stretching out his limbs.

Any minute now...

He froze in his actions and returned his gaze to me, his hands dropping limply to his sides.

His eyes swept slowly up and down my body in surprise. I expected him to stop, or start in on his sarcastic comments

but he continued to stare. I felt myself turning a bright red under his meticulous gaze.

It seemed I had lost the ability to speak since I couldn't find the voice to make a rude comment.

I shifted nervously, which he seemed to notice because his lips tugged up into a smirk...

The Last Dance (22)

Wow, this is like a record fast update for me! But don't think they'll all be up this fast! I just had too much fun writing this chapter lol

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

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_____

Chapter 22 - Homeward Bound

He opened his mouth to say something and in a panic, I frantically jumped in before he could having finally found my voice.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to stare?" I asked haughtily.

He wasn't at all fazed by my comment, nor did his eyes stop roaming my body.

"A skirt?" He asked teasingly.

"Don't even start with me" I snapped back annoyed.

He finally raised his eyes to mine and I could see them twinkling in amusement. I glared at him and turned away abruptly, flinching when the skirt whipped around me from the action. I could hear John's husky laugh behind me and stomped away to Coriolis being careful not to make any more sudden movements.

Lousy skirts.

I lifted my hand to rub Cori and murmured softly to him. This was why I stuck to practice clothes; you couldn't get into any trouble with them.

I heard John walking up behind me and stubbornly kept my focus on Cori. Suddenly I felt a pair of arms wrap loosely around my waist, freezing me in place. Heat rushed up to fill my cheeks as John leaned in dangerously close to me. Now I had another reason not to turn my head even slightly in his direction.

"I was only teasing Cece, you look really pretty."

I frowned in confusion and cocked an eyebrow in disbelief, even though he couldn't see. All the humour was gone from his voice and he actually sounded... sincere? I wiggled out of his grasp and murmured a quick 'thanks' feeling awkward.

Why did he keep doing this to me? It was always so unexpected; he could go straight from teasing to serious in the blink of an eye. I didn't know whether he meant anything by it or if it was just his usual personality.

I held back a sigh of frustration, I didn't even have anything to compare it to since he never talked much with the court ladies, or at least not that I had seen. I suppose I just never paid attention, thought I had a funny feeling I would notice from now on.

Even worse than all that though, was that I couldn't be sure how I wanted him to feel about me. It was all too complicated. And forget how I might fee--

No, I wasn't even going to think about that. Not now, in the glaring light of the day... maybe there

something about the night that let you get away with such thoughts.

"You should wear skirts more often, you actually don't look half bad dressed like a real lady" He said, pulling me from my musings.

The sarcasm was back and I couldn't help but smile, the tension from moments ago vanishing.

I turned to face him with a pout. "What, I go from pretty to not half bad just like that?"

He grinned at me and shrugged. "You've always been beautiful" He said casually, "A skirt doesn't change that" He added before turning and jumping up onto Shadow.

Not knowing how to respond to that I busied myself with putting the packs onto Cori.

He thought I was beautiful?

Since when?

He's always made fun of how I never dress like a girl. The most surprising part was how casually he'd said it. As if it was common knowledge.

Little did he know this was only the second time I'd heard those words spoken to me before. I felt oddly pleased; while I might not be fond of the clothes themselves, I wasn't immune to the compliment.

I shook my head and tugged on Cori's reins.

Oh.

This might be a problem.

How was I supposed to get up there?

I wonder how the court ladies always managed to do it; I would have to ask them. But in the mean time what could I do?

I tried lifting a leg up to the stirrup, but felt the skirt hitch up and tug uncomfortable and quickly put it back down.

Busy with my thoughts I hadn't heard John dismount and let out a gasp of surprise when I felt myself lifted off the ground. I heard John laughing as he placed me gently side saddle. I blinked in surprise as he mounted back up onto Shadow and shot me a wink.

"You're welcome, My Lady."

He gave me a bow from the saddle and grinned teasingly.

I rolled my eyes at him but felt somewhat grateful all the same. I took the reins in hand and looked down at them as if they were a foreign object.

I heard an exaggerated sigh close by. "What now?"

"I umm.. err.. that is... I don't know... how to ride side saddle" I finished quickly.

My cheeks turned red as John burst into another round of laughter. Well, at least someone was amused.

"My, that

a problem" He chuckled.

"As always, you're so very helpful" I grumbled.

He grinned apologetically. "Fine then, why don't you ride with me and we can put Coriolis on a lead?"

My eyes widened in shock. Oh, there was no way that was going to happen. Wasn't it bad enough I kept embarrassing myself and was stuck wearing this ridiculously impractical skirt?

"It's fine, I can make this work, wearing a skirt doesn't mean I can't ride normally."

His eyes scrunched up in confusion and he opened him mouth to ask but I wasn't paying attention. I made a quick decision, and before I could chicken out, hiked the skirt up to my thighs so I could swing a leg over to the other side.

I tugged the edges down but it only reached to just below my knees. Still at least I would be able to ride this way. I

turned to give a triumphant look to John only to find his eyes lingering on the newly exposed skin.

"Eyes forward John" I said embarrassed.

He looked up guiltily and cleared his throat before turning Shadow and riding forward. I kept close behind, noting with satisfaction that a blush was rising up his neck. Good, at least I wasn't the only one being embarrassed.

***

We rode in a comfortable silence focusing on keeping up a steady pace. The silence was necessary so that we could listen for any sounds on the road. After coming so far it wouldn't do to be caught now.

There were a few instances when we had to leave the path, keeping to the shadows of the forest that ran parallel to the road. I was all too aware of the fact that soon enough we'd lose the protection from the trees.

When the sun was high in the sky we'd left many miles behind us and stopped to rest the horses.

"How far are we going today?"

His voice startled me after so many hours of silence. Since morning our only communication had been through hand signals for when we had to duck into the trees.

"I think we should go up until the edge of the forest and spend the night there under the cover of the trees. Then we'll have all of tomorrow to reach the castle."

He nodded gravely but didn't say anything more. Truth be told, I was surprised by how quiet he'd been the whole day.

I'd thought he was just tired, but now I wasn't so sure. Now that we'd stopped and I had a chance to look at him I noticed the tight set of his jaw and the faraway look in his eyes.

Clearly his thoughts were elsewhere.

I wondered if I should ask him, but I hesitated, fearing it would be something personal. In all the times we'd talked together it had never really been about anything personal. We'd both avoided talking about anything to do with the castle, as if it was a world of its own, separate from the time we'd been away. Our conversations had all been frivolous and casual, only encompassing the present circumstances.

Still, I felt like I should say something. Just as I was about to John stood up from where he'd been sitting and untied the horses. I guess it was time to move again.

With a sigh I walked over to Cori, slightly relieved I didn't have to talk to him. It's not that I didn't want to deal with his personal problems, I just feared, with our history it could spark up some of the old animosity.

I'd shed some of my self-consciousness during the day, and also adapted somewhat to wearing a skirt, so I didn't need John's help to mount up again. It annoyed me that my movements had to be made with so much more care, but I suppose it would only be for a little while longer.

We headed out again, falling into the same rhythm as before, with only the gentle footfalls of the horses to break the silence.

The hours slipped away and the sun began sinking quickly into the horizon. I could just make out the edge of the forest ahead of us and we rode on quickly in the scant light.

When we found a good place to stop it was fully dark out, with only the moon providing any light. I knew even that comfort would be sparse once we entered the trees.

John dismounted and wordlessly offered me a hand down from Cori. I had to admit to being a little surprised at his behaviour. It still amazed me that he could be the perfect gentlemen when he chose to be.

I disliked having to accept the help, but no one had ever offered it before, and it was sweet of him to do so. I took his hand and he placed the other on my waist to lift me down, again as if I weighed nothing at all. He then grabbed Cori's reins with his own and led us into the trees.

We didn't go very far in, just enough so as not to be visible from the road. I felt the weariness from the day catch up with me and blinked sleepily. Although I'd slept well last night the stress from the day had worn me out. Since our stop in the afternoon, I'd kept a tense eye on John, worrying over him incessantly. Silly really, since it was probably nothing anyway.

We tied up the horses and didn't bother with a fire since the weather was unusually warm tonight.

I spread a blanket on the ground and wrapped another one around me before settling down. John lay down on his stomach and propped himself up with his elbows staring off into the dark. It bugged me how quiet he'd been all day, save for the few words he'd said earlier.

Only this morning we'd had a friendly banter going, but from then on, near silence.

"Why so quiet?" I ventured to ask. I was going crazy with curiosity, and despite how tired I felt, I knew I couldn't sleep

without knowing.

"Hmmm... oh just... thinking..." He said distractedly.

I debated whether or not to prod further when he turned to me, suddenly focused.

The Last Dance (23)

First of all I want to give a big thank you to all my news fans and of course all my old ones for all your comments and votes and support =)

I'm honestly soo amazed, back when I started this story I only had like 20 people reading it and now I'm getting in the 300 for every chapter. Just wow! Thank you =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

I spread a blanket on the ground and wrapped another one around me before settling down. John lay down on his stomach and propped himself up with his elbows staring off into the dark. It bugged me how quiet he'd been all day, save for the few words he'd said earlier. Only this morning he was teasing my about my clothes and from then on, utter silence.

"Why so quiet?" I ventured to ask. I was going crazy with curiosity, and despite how tired I felt, I knew I couldn't sleep without knowing.

"Hmmm... oh just... thinking..." He said distractedly. I debated whether or not to prod further when he turned to me, suddenly focused.

Chapter 23 - Confessions

"How is it that we've known each other forever and yet know nothing about each other?"

Well, that certainly wasn't what I was expecting.

I wasn't sure if he was serious or just trying to distract me from my previous question. Well, if he didn't want to talk about it I wouldn't force him, I guess it was personal. I gave him a half smile.

"Speak for yourself, I know plenty about you."

He looked genuinely surprised. "You do?" He asked sceptically.

I nodded.

"Like what?"

"I don't know lots of things." I tried shrugging but it was hard to do while lying down.

"What's my favourite color?" He asked immediately.

"Dark green" I said confidently.

"Favourite weapon to use?"

"Archery, when mounted" I recited.

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and frowned. "Well, anyone could figure those out" He said grumpily.

I smiled "You think you have to be perfect for people to respect you, you resent the fact that your friends go easy on you, you don't trust people easily, you're afraid of being a failure, you used to think the castle was haunted, you stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves, but always privately, and sometimes you do nice things for people for no reason without expecting anything in return and even without them knowing it was you."

I said the last point quietly, more to myself than for him to hear, even though he must have in the silence of the forest. I fingered the glittering bracelet on my wrist, a constant reminder of the very quality I'd just described.

"Shall I go on?"

I turned to face him, only to see that his jaw was hanging open in shock.

He looked stunned; at a complete loss for words. Was he really that surprised? I hid a smile but knew I wasn't succeeding.

"How... how did you... how do you know all that?" He whispered.

I raised an eye brow "Well, for one thing, I'm not blind, and I pay attention" I teased.

He didn't seem amused, instead his forehead crinkled and he frowned thoughtfully.

"But then... why don't I know any of that stuff about you?"

I yawned "Well, presumably you were always too busy making fun of me to notice" I said in a bemused tone of voice.

He didn't seem to share my opinion; instead he looked horrified by my comment. "I can't believe how much of a jerk I am" He muttered sadly.

I stared at him in alarm seeing a dejected look come over his face.

He turned away from me abruptly and started fiddling with a stick on the ground, looking oddly devastated.

I felt the smile melt off my face and suddenly found it unbearable to see him like this. How was it possible for him to have such an effect on me? Just seeing the sadness etched on his face felt like a physical blow.

"John, I wasn't being serious. I mean, well it's true, but I didn't mean for you to feel badly about it, I certainly don't take it as an insult, truly, it's just the way we've always been."

I tried vainly to convince him but he didn't seem at all cheered. He didn't even look up, just kept his gaze stubbornly on the ground. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why this made him so upset. I bit my lip, wondering what I could say to make this better.

"Is it really that big a deal to you?" I asked, genuinely curious.

He sighed and turned his face to the side, staring off into the dark.

"It's just... how self absorbed do you have to be not to know a thing about someone you've grown up with? All I know about you is from what I've seen in the last few days. Until then I thought the way you acted towards me was the way you actually were. I feel so stupid."

I struggled to think of what to say to make this better. Really how does one respond to that?

"It's not like I haven't changed my own judgements of you recently. You know, you probably know me better that you're giving yourself credit for" I said hesitantly.

He finally turned to face me and met my gaze. I could see the uncertainly in his features.

"And it's not too late you know, if it's all of a sudden so important to you" I added teasingly.

This managed to make him smile, finally.

"Alright then, what's your favourite color?"

"Purple, the shade you get only during a sunrise... beautiful" I said smiling to myself. "That's part of the reason I'm always up before the sun, just so I can see it."

He looked up at the sky with an expression that seemed wistful, though the moonlight only outlined the planes of his face, so I couldn't be sure.

"Show me sometime?"

Well, that's something, John taking an interest in something I like. But maybe he's just trying to make up for not knowing in the first place. Yes, that's probably it.

"Of course" I murmured. Surely he would forget soon anyway.

He nodded and thought about his next question. "And a sword is your favourite weapon?" He added hopefully.

I nodded and he looked relieved "See, you know something about me."

"Well, not until the day we had a duel. Just from that look on your face of complete confidence. And the way you fought as if the sword were an extension of your arm. You looked like you were born to be a swordsman. Err... well swordswoman I guess" He said ruefully.

It was my turn to be surprised. "See, you notice things."

His face brightened at that and he looked considerably happier.

He stayed silent for a few moments, probably thinking of his next question. I waited anxiously for it, knowing that it wouldn't be as easy as the last two.

"Tell me something no one else knows" He said quietly.

His question took me by surprise, unnerved me even. Something no one else knew? Couldn't it just be something

didn't know?

I shifted my eyes upward, feeling unsure. It was a fair question though, just not one with an easy answer. I thought about it, wondering what to tell him. It couldn't be just anything.

"You don't have to tell me... if you don't want to" He said when I didn't answer right away.

He tried to say it nonchalantly, but I didn't miss the hurt in his voice.

I thought about it a moment longer before slowly answering "You said I was born to be a swordswoman..." I started in a whisper "...but what you don't know... and what no one else knows... is that I'm only as good as I am because of you."

He frowned in confusion, like it was a trick answer. I sighed, knowing I'd have to explain, and that there could be no going back after this. The words were hard to get out, hard to share with someone else, especially the one they concerned.

"Despite all our differences in the past, you were the thing that kept me going... there were so many times I was ready to give up... and I probably would have... if it hadn't been for you. At the beginning it was all about trying to be better than you... prove you wrong... but then I realized I loved it. It was everything to me, and I might never have known it had it not been for you and your constant badgering. Ironic isn't it?" I added playfully.

My voice had steadied out as I talked, and I found that it was easier than I'd thought.

I saw a smile tugging up the corners of his lips, and felt one on my face as well. It was almost a relief saying it out loud. For so many years it had felt like a weakness, a shameful secret. Not anymore though, now that we were past our hatred.

"Thank you" He whispered.

We stayed in silence for a while and I figured the conversation was over. I blinked lazily up at the stars. It was too bad we would be back tomorrow. Back at the castle things would change again. He'd go back to being a Prince, not the person I'd learned to tolerate over the past week. It had been interesting actually, being around John without us getting into some kind of fight.

Well, at least this time around, when we got back we'd be friends. I closed my eyes, waiting for sleep to come, but it seemed to be eluding me. Not that I really wanted to sleep. Even with how tired I was, I knew that the sooner this night ended the closer we'd be to getting home. I sighed loudly into the silence.

"You still awake Cece?" John asked softly.

I turned to him in surprise, so I wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep. "Yes."

"Can I... tell you something personal?"

I turned towards him curiously. It seemed this was a night for intense conversations.

He had a hesitant look on his face, as if he'd spent a lot of time debating whether or not to tell me. I could see the struggle behind his eyes and nodded sympathetically.

"I..." He turned away, seeming unable to face me.

"I'm afraid of having to go back and... and get... married" He said the last word so quietly I wouldn't have heard if the night hadn't been so silent and still.

Of course, I'd almost forgotten about that. It made me feel strangely sad to think about and I could only imagine what

he must feel.

It also occurred to me to wonder if he'd ever had anyone to talk to about all his doubts and worries about his future. As if it wasn't hard enough being a Prince, to carry the burden alone would only be worse, and I was suddenly sure that he did carry it alone.

I was surprised that he would choose to confide to me of all people, but I figured that what we'd gone through the last few days had made him trust me unquestionably. Moreover, I found that I didn't mind his trusting me, was even glad that he did.

"It must be hard... never knowing who acts genuine around you and who doesn't" I ventured.

"It is... but at least my friends try and look out for me."

He sounded so sad and I suddenly really wanted to make him laugh. He'd spent too much time wallowing in his thoughts for one night.

"Well I have the perfect plan for you" I said seriously.

"Oh? What's that?" He asked with interest.

Perfect, I had his full attention.

I hid a smile and fought to keep my face straight. "It's simple really. Just act like the royal pain in the arse you are and the girls who put up with you, well they're obviously faking it, but the ones who run for the hills, those are the ones worth going after. If you can convince them you were only acting."

I turned to him with a smirk and he looked momentarily taken aback. I watched him tensely, and was rewarded with a breathtaking smile before he burst out laughing.

It rang clear and loud, completely uninhibited, and I knew it came straight from the heart. I was surprised that no birds had taken flight at the sudden noise. He laughed for a long time, and I grinned, feeling happier just from hearing it.

"You are something else Cece" He said when he had managed to control himself.

"Well, I guess I'll take that as a compliment"

****

Well, hope you enjoyed that, because it's that last you're getting for a while (run and hide) sorry I have exams, but just so you'll have something to look forward to... the next chapter is going to have some of John's POV!! I'm excited, I already have some of it written and I will no doubt be writing every second I'm not studying, so maybe maybeeee it will be posted soon. But fair warning if it isn't! =)

Xo.

The Last Dance (24)

Okay sooo, sorry for the long wait, but actually, this was much sooner than I expected, since I'm still in the middle of exams =(

It's a good thing for you I was so obsessed with this chapter, there were so many places I was going to cut it off, but then just kept going, and I promise it was worth the wait =) I love this chapter, you'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll love me, then hate me, but that's all I'm going to say.

P.S!!!! Listen to this song, the lyrics are at the end and believe me, this song was like WRITTEN for this chapter. I swear, it was like destiny. I was listening to the radio a few days ago, flipping through, when this song caught my attention, I'd never even heard it before and then I found the lyrics and it was an OMG moment. It's like when the stars all line up perfectly in the sky... =)

ok enough ranting go read!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

I turned to him with a smirk and he looked momentarily taken aback. I watched him tensely, and was rewarded with a breathtaking smile before he burst out laughing. It rang clear and loud, completely uninhibited, and I knew it came straight from the heart. I was surprised that no birds had taken flight at the sudden noise. He laughed for a long time, and I grinned, feeling happier just from hearing it.

"You are something else Cece" He said when he had managed to control himself.

"Well, I guess I'll take that as a compliment"

Chapter 24 - Bend or Break?

I woke up the next morning feeling tired from not getting much sleep the night before. I guess we had stayed up longer than I thought. But then again, when I finally had fallen asleep it had been deep and peaceful.

I looked up and noticed with alarm that the sun was quite high in the sky. We'd already lost several hours of riding!

I turned to wake up John but didn't see him beside me anymore, nor was any of his stuff here. That was odd. If he'd been up early why hadn't he woken me up?

I rolled up my blankets and rubbed out any signs of where I'd slept. I was surprised to see that John had already done the same to his spot.

Walking out of the trees, I saw the horses still tethered where we'd left them last night, all packed and ready to leave.

I walked to the edge of the trees, keeping to the shadows so I could scan the road, with the plain stretching ahead of me as far as the eye could see. I felt heartened by the sight, knowing those grassy roads were the only thing separating me from home.

The familiar sound of a sword cutting through air caught my attention and I turned around, listening to where it had come from. I followed the noise back into the tress to a small clearing, my gaze landing on John while he was in the midst of a complex pattern dance, one I'd taught him.

I followed his movements in awe, surprised at the new grace in his steps. As I followed the downward swipe of his sword I realized, to my embarrassment, that he wasn't wearing a shirt. I felt my face go red and quickly turned away, but not before the image was imprinted in my mind.

I was extremely grateful that he was still too caught up in his training to notice my presence. My eyes drifted back there, despite my silent scolding, to admire the way his muscles flexed with each movement.

I forced my eyes away again. How pathetic. It's not like I hadn't seen men shirtless before. In fact, most of them trained that way in the summer months. But I'd never felt embarrassed by it before.

I had to announce my presence somehow.

Right.

Go ahead.

Say something.

Anytime now.

Anytime...

I cleared my throat hoping it would do the trick.

To my relief the swipe of the sword stopped and I looked up from beneath my eyelashes, not daring to raise my face any further so that the blush was obvious.

"Morning!" He said cheerfully, and as ever, completely unfazed.

"Why didn't you wake me?" The words came out as a squeak and I had to clear my throat and repeat myself to be heard.

He walked closer to me, breathing heavily, and reached past me to pull his shirt off the branch behind me.

"Sorry, you looked so peaceful I didn't want to wake you, and I figured we had plenty of time still." He was still breathless from the workout and his words came out in short bursts, sounding husky and deep.

My throat felt dry and I only nodded. I didn't even want to think about what his voice was doing to me right now.

My blush deepened and I was glad we stood in the shadows.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" he asked.

I could hear the smile in his voice.

"No" I replied with a scoff.

"Then why won't you look at me" he teased.

I shrugged "There's nothing to see."

Liar.

He laughed while pulling on his tunic "Ouch, aren't you even a little impressed?"

I raised my eyes to meet his now that there was no chance of embarrassing myself. The light cotton of his tunic still showed off his build. Impressed? He had no idea.

"Fishing for compliments are we?" I said instead.

"We are indeed, but I'm not likely to get any from you am I?" He asked with a pout.

I laughed "You're learning."

"And you're impressed."

"Am not."

He walked past me and I glimpsed a smile on his face. "Your blush says otherwise."

I felt a look of complete mortification cover my face.

Great. Just great. How embarrassing.

I reluctantly turned around and walked slowly over to the horses where John was untying the reins. I suppose it didn't matter how red my face was now, nothing could be more embarrassing than that.

He handed me the reins for Cori with a surprisingly sweet smile, and turned away to mount up on Shadow.

I used the moment while his back was turned to let out the breath I'd been holding, since I'd been expecting him to rub it in.

I jumped up on Cori and followed his lead out of the line of trees, wondering where this new change had come from. He never did what I expected him to; it always came as a surprise. When I expected him to make fun of me he'd be sweet instead. When I joked around he'd sometimes get serious. I used to be able to predict his reaction to anything before, and now...

We'd been alone together too long.

That was probably it. But not for long, tonight we'd be back and these weird emotions would go away. I think.

Well, at least it was good to see that John was in a more cheerful mood, even if it HAD been at my expense. But I didn't like how often my gaze drifted over to him.

He talked easily, not bringing up this morning at all, and after a few minutes of feeling awkward I relaxed and was able to keep up with the conversation. When not talking we lapsed into a comfortable silence.

Two hours melted away quickly but as the distance between us and the castle shortened I noticed a small grimace forming on John's face. He adopted a look of apprehension soon after that, which only became grimmer as the journey went on. I couldn't even being to imagine what he was going through, much less how to fix it.

The atmosphere between us significantly changed and I could practically feel the tension in the air. It was so thick I felt like I could cut through it with a knife, and yet so fragile I was afraid a single word would shatter it.

Finally, a few tense hours later, the barest outline of the castle spires came into sight. John's pace slowed down and I followed suit, keeping a worried eye on him.

A few minutes later the whole castle could be seen, and he stopped altogether, contemplating it in silence. The sun was setting and already the sky was a swirl of dusty pink and purple. We'd decided earlier to wait until nightfall so that the cover of night could keep our return from being noticed too early.

I dismounted and took the reins from his limp hands, leading the horses away, to give him a few minutes alone.

When I'd gone far enough away I looked back at the shadow of the castle and then to the outline of the Prince.

He looked so lonely up there.

Was that how he felt back home too?

Unexpectedly a surge of guilt ran through me. Who was I to force him to go back if he truly didn't want to? Because I knew it was only on my account that he had agreed to come back, after I'd insensitively called him out for all his shortcomings the first night I'd found him. It seemed like years ago I'd yelled at him about his duty to the throne and his people, but what right did I have?

Maybe he was right before, maybe I didn't know him.

Sure, I knew John, the guy who could be as sweet and caring as he was annoying, but I hadn't found that out until recently. I may have known some personal things about him, but I knew nothing about Prince Johnathan.

The pressure, the stress, the constant attention and high expectations.

Really, what did I know about duty and honour and having a whole kingdom of people look up to you?

Nothing.

Less even than the court ladies because I avoided all the balls and state functions. Even with my father as a council elder, I'd never taken an interest with court politics or anything of the sort.

Realizing all this, I couldn't help but be ashamed at having judged him so harshly that day without any idea of what it was really like.

Everyone deserved the chance to forge their own path, whatever it may be. How would I ever react to being tied down like that, forced into a life I didn't want?

I knew it would drive me mad, and obviously it had driven him to the extreme measure of running away.

And I, in my ignorance had dragged him back after he'd only had a taste of the freedom I always enjoyed.

It wasn't right.

The guilt smacked into me like a wall, making my eyes sting with tears.

I looked back towards John and saw that he was walking slowly towards me. I blinked furiously trying to hide it before he could see.

I knew what I had to do. I had to let him go, at least give him the chance. But that didn't make the words any easier to say. Why did it take so long for me to realize? Why did I have to see it now when I'd already grown so attached?

I faced him and smiled weakly but he didn't seem convinced. A frown appeared on his face and I turned away,

not bothering to hide my guilt.

John's POV

I stared at the castle, lit up by the last rays of the setting sun. I was a little apprehensive about getting back, but truthfully, I didn't mind it. I could deal with it now, having Cece on my side.

I looked over to see her staring off into the distance. She looked so vulnerable standing there with her arms hugging her sides for comfort. Lost almost, something I'd never seen on her before.

She was always so careful to act strong around me, always hated showing any sign of weakness. I still felt a little bad about embarrassing her this morning, but the words had fallen out before I could stop them.

I couldn't help it, she had just looked so sweet standing there blushing and refusing to look at me. And something about being around her these days always made me reckless.

Had it only been over a week ago that we'd hated each other? It seemed another life time away.

Her face looked pained now, as if she was having some kind of internal debate. I wanted so badly to make her feel better, something I'd been experiencing a lot lately.

I never knew how to act around her though, because it seemed she reacted differently every time.

It was baffling still, trying to predict her reactions; I guess that was one thing that hadn't changed. At least I'd learned,

if nothing else, not to move too fast with her. She got scared off easily, just getting this far had been agonizing.

Worth it though, not to feel her tense up every time I came too close to her. She probably hadn't even noticed the way she tensed up around me, but I had.

Every time.

And still, it wasn't enough; it got harder every time, pulling away before I did something to make her run away. But seeing her now, I couldn't stand here and do nothing. Not when she'd proved to be there for me time and time again. And she'd actually confided in me yesterday, trusted me enough to talk to me when she didn't have to. She'd even complimented me without being tricked into it.

I wished she would let herself care for me, but I knew that was asking too much. It went against her very personality to depend on anyone but herself.

That she even let me get this close was amazing. I liked to believe she'd developed some sort of soft spot for me, letting me into her life the way she had. Maybe it was good that she kept me at a distance though, since I was hardly sure of my own feelings for her. I knew I cared about her, a lot, but did this ceasefire between us only exist out here, away from the castle?

My legs moved me towards her on their own, driven by this irrational need to hold onto her. Keep her here with me and erase the creases of worry from her face.

She looked up seeing my approach and blinked rapidly, trying to keep back the tears that were making her eyes wide and glassy. She tried smiling at me, but when I

grimaced in response her face sagged back into its former expression.

I knew then something was really bothering her. Otherwise she would have stubbornly kept that fake smile on her face whether I bought it or not.

I knew I had to be careful, I hoped I could be. I stopped a few steps away from her and hesitated.

Slowly, I lifted a hand to her cheek, gauging her reaction. She didn't flinch away from me, for which I was grateful, even relieved.

I traced her jaw with my finger, giving her the chance to pull away if she wanted, before gently turning her face towards me.

She opened her mouth to say something, to tell me off? But then changed her mind and closed it again.

She met my eyes for a moment, and whatever she saw in my face made her eyes widen before she turned her face away, but not completely. That was something.

I took a step closer, enough to slip an arm loosely around her waist.

She wouldn't look at me, but she didn't pull away either, or tense up for that matter. Could it be she was finally getting comfortable around me?

I moved my free hand under her chin and gently pulled her face up to meet my eyes yet again. I could see the confusion and fear in her eyes, a tear slipped out tracing a line down her cheek and she started blinking furiously again.

She tried, and failed to say something again, biting her lip to keep whatever words she wanted to say back.

I couldn't take it anymore seeing her look this fragile, having her right in my arms and doing nothing.

Was it taking advantage?

I don't know, but I couldn't resist, couldn't stop myself from leaning closer.

Her eyes widened further, panic flashing across them briefly before I pressed my lips down to hers.

It was like a volcanic eruption, the way heat moved like flowing lava to every part of me, wrapping me up in its warmth. It took all of my self control to be gentle with her, after wanting this for so long. And there was no denying I had.

I tightened my grip only slightly, still cautious, afraid to close the remaining distance between us.

Kissing her was like nothing I ever imagined. I had wanted to so many times before, always freezing at the last second, afraid of her rejection. But she didn't stop me; to my delight, she relaxed and returned the kiss softly.

A fire burned between us, but it wasn't the out of control flames like the forest fire. It was like the slow heat of fire embers, smouldering just beneath the surface, and even sweeter because of it, deceptive in its innocence.

I wanted to memorize every moment of this, the feel of her soft lips against mine, giving in to the kiss, the gentle trembling of her body in my embrace, even the feel of her wet eyelashes brushing my cheeks.

I wanted her closer to me, wanting to make the most of this moment while it lasted, because it would probably be my last, my only chance.

I tugged her forward and she tripped, falling into me, obviously not expecting it.

I could feel myself smiling against her lips, my body vibrating from silent laughter. The absurdity of it was hilarious. Only Celia, the girl who was deadly in a fight and never missed a step could stumble in the middle of a kiss, of all things.

And yet, she'd never been as perfect as she was right now, so alluring in her shyness and tentative movements.

I thought it was adorable, though I knew she must be embarrassed. I reached up to cup her cheek with my hand and from the warmth, could tell she was blushing.

She moved to free herself, but I wasn't ready to let go just yet. I put my arm around her, pulling her close to me in a tight hug.

She tensed only slightly, but didn't try pulling away again. I had expected it this time though, every time before I'd been the one to walk away, afraid to wait for her reaction, but not this time.

I couldn't bring myself to leave, whatever the outcome.

After what seemed like an eternity she put her arms around me, relaxing into my embrace. It warmed me right up despite the chilly night.

I knew it wouldn't last. She didn't feel that way about me.

It was a stretch for her just calling me a friend. I'd heard her explain our relationship to people before. She always hesitated, never knowing how to respond. She always settled on friends, but doubted even that with the words that followed. 'If that... maybe...' They always followed, always hurt me to hear.

What was I then? If not even a friend?

No, I wouldn't think about that, not now while I had her.

I found her lips again and kissed her long and deep. Her arms tightened around me and I gladly pulled her closer.

Her body trembled still; I hoped she wasn't afraid I would hurt her. I never would again. I tried to convey that to her now, since the right words always failed me when I was around her.

Did she feel it too? This undeniable force between us? Because it felt stronger than gravity to me.

I wished it could last forever, but it was naive to think that. This moment seemed detached from reality, like a dream in its beauty and perfection. And like all dreams, it would end too soon.

As if sensing my thoughts, she suddenly tensed up, and I reluctantly pulled away, knowing it was probably what she wanted.

I mourned the feel of her pulling away and the cold it left behind.

We stood awkwardly facing each other, and I could swear I saw regret behind her eyes, but it was quickly obscured by a fresh glaze of moisture.

No tears escaped her control this time, and I couldn't read the emotions racing across her eyes, thought I imagined they mirrored my own.

Her cheeks were still flushed, she still looked glowing and radiant in my eyes, but she couldn't ever be

.

I didn't regret kissing her though, not for a moment. While I'd never kissed another girl before, I knew none could possibly compare after this.

Finally she took a breath and met my eyes, with a look of determination.

"Go" She whispered.

I took an unconscious step back feeling shocked and confused.

Had I gone too far this time? Did she really want me gone?

I blinked back my own tears, hoping she couldn't see. I couldn't lose her, not now.

Was it too hard for her to be around me now? Did she think it was some kind of obligation to stay away from me? Why hadn't I thought of that possibility before I so recklessly kissed her?

"I'm sorry" I pleaded desperately "I--"

"Don't be sorry" She interrupted.

"Then why do you want me to go?" I heard my voice crack near the end and swallowed frantically, trying to hold back a sob.

If it meant nothing to her then why should it mean a thing to me? But it did, more than I was willing to admit.

Her eyes widened in shock. "This isn't about that" She said gesturing between us.

My shoulders sagged in relief, but I was even more confused now, if not that then what?

"What is it about then?" I whispered, not daring to believe she was okay with what happened.

She shivered and turned her face away from me.

"I meant, you can go, you don't have to come back to the castle with me. It isn't what you want, I'm sorry it took so long for me to see that" She said sadly.

"I don't understand."

"You're free to go, go live whatever life you want, not the one you think you have to. I'll make something up, or tell them the truth I'll... figure it out..."

I regarded her curiously as realization dawned on me.

She thought she was forcing me to go back to the castle. How wrong she was.

But now I was filled with doubts. What brought on this sudden remorse? Was it that she didn't want me back? Was this her way of turning me down gently?

I fixed her with an intense stare. "Do you want me to leave? Do you think I can't do it?" I asked sadly.

She wouldn't meet my eyes "No, that's not it at all. Of course you can do it; of course you'll be great but... if it's

not what you want I don't want to be the one to make you."

"But... do you... want me to stay?" I asked hesitantly, afraid of her answer.

"This isn't about me John, it's your choice."

I glared at her, waiting until she met my eyes "When will you see that it

about you too, whether you'll admit it or not. I need to know" I added softly.

Celia's POV

How could I answer that question now? After what just happened?

It had been hard enough finding the strength to tell him he could go after he'd kissed me.

It still seemed unreal. He kissed me. John kissed me. I could hardly wrap the idea around my head, wouldn't even have believed it had it not just happened.

And I let him.

He gave me plenty of chances to stop him, but I didn't. There was no denying it this time, no explaining it away.

He'd known exactly what he was doing; I had seen it in his eyes just before he closed the distance between us. I couldn't just brush it away this time. Not when I still felt it in every part of my body.

I should have known he felt that way. It seemed so obvious now, but then, I guess it had been from the start. I just didn't want to see it.

And yet for every time he'd had that look in his eyes, there was one when he'd joke shamelessly just for amusement. Not even counting all the times he'd done something serious and either left before I had a chance to react, or act as if it was nothing.

What was even harder to accept though was how I was letting myself feel about him.

Not that I would ever let him know, not now, when I knew it was exactly what he wanted.

He wasn't mine. He could never be mine. He belonged to someone else, someone who could be his queen. Not an upstart lady knight like me. I didn't want that life anyway, but it hurt knowing someone else would have it. I would have to go back and watch him fall in love with someone else.

I had hated pulling away, hadn't wanted to do it, but the kiss was just proof that he was only going back for me.

I couldn't let him do that. I'd had to offer him a way out. And now he wanted me to choose.

I shook my head miserably. It would be even worse, now that I'd had a taste of something so sweet. Bittersweet more like.

The last rays of the sun were behind him and I could see the torment in his face; hope and desperation, pain and confusion.

It hurt just to look at.

What should I do?

I wanted him to be happy, something I'd never considered before.

Did I want him to stay?

Yes, the answer came immediately to me.

I didn't want to lose the bond we'd made even if it now hung on a precarious balance. But would he be happy stuck there in the life he never wanted in the first place?

If I said no, he'd probably leave, make a new life, probably in the forest with our new friends, but would it hurt him to think I didn't want him around?

I knew it would, and I don't think I could live with it.

Before it wouldn't have even fazed me that he might be hurt by something I said, but now it made a big difference. And I knew what he'd said was right. This

about me.

I sighed uneasily and looked at him. He was still staring at me intently, waiting for my answer, and I knew all at once I would pick the selfish answer.

I'd rather have him resent his life at the castle than me. But maybe he would grow to like being King, whereas he would never stop resenting me.

I almost felt sick with myself as the words that could change everything forced its way out.

Selfish.

"Yes... I... want you to stay" I whispered.

His shoulders sagged, from relief or resignation I didn't know, but he smiled weakly at me once more.

"I was hoping you'd say that. I... need you there..."

I shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to say what I knew I had to. These words pained me even more than the last.

"John... we can't... this can't happen again... the High Ball... and you..."

I trailed off not being able to say anything more. I just stared at him anxiously, hoping he would understand, though I regretted it already.

He frowned in confusion for a while before realization dawned on him.

The Ball. Where he'd have to pick a wife. We'd both known it all along.

He blinked rapidly and looked away. I couldn't even being to read the emotions on his face, but they were gone as fast as they'd come.

He turned back to me, and for a moment I saw a look in his eyes that made me want to reach out to him, but I knew I couldn't. Not while the wound was so fresh between us.

He nodded slowly, miserably. "So... what now?" He asked thickly.

And I knew what he meant without even having to hear the words. "You said we were friends..." I began. "...and we still are. I won't leave you just because..." I trailed off again, gesturing between us.

I managed a shaky smile, though I knew it didn't reach my eyes, and I knew he could tell. Still, he fought to return it.

I turned away before he could see the tears that refused to be blinked back. I felt, if anything, worse than before.

Yes I was glad that he was staying, but at what cost? Would he end up resenting me anyway because of what I'd just done? I certainly hated myself for it.

This whole journey had been about bringing him back before he got hurt, and yet I was sure I'd just managed to hurt him more than the forest ever could have.

Wordlessly, we each took our reins and trudged slowly on towards the castle, shielded by the shadows of the night that could, for a moment, mask all our misery and doubts.

****

Theo Tams - Wait for You

So the truth came out

But I took my anger and laid it down

You see well I'm not gonna to fight

So take my sword my shield my pride

Turning your body you tell me no, I cannot make it

Kissing you lips oh it kills me no, I cannot take it

Tell me the truth love did we just bend or did we break it?

Living a lie is not easy

Throw a stone into the sky and it will come back to you

Beggars will beg thieves will steal and liars will bend the truth

And if you pick a flower you know it's bound to die

And I will wait for you

Well I stood still and stared in your eyes

I could trace the path of the tears you cried

And cried and cried and cried

Turning your body you tell me no, I cannot make it

Kissing you lips oh it kills me no, I cannot take it

Tell me the truth love did we just bend or did we break it?

Living a lie is not easy

Throw a stone into the sky and it will come back to you

Beggars will beg thieves will steal and liars will bend the truth

And if you pick a flower you know it's bound to die

And I will wait for you

I never wanna see you cry

I never wanna leave your side

I only wanna live this life standing next to you

I will wait for you

Turning your body you tell me no, I cannot make it

Kissing you lips oh it kills me no, I cannot take it

Throw a stone into the sky and it will come back to you

Beggars will beg thieves will steal and liars will bend the truth

And if you pick a flower you know it's bound to die

And I will wait for you

So the truth same out

But i took my anger and laid it down

The Last Dance (25)

Wow, so thanks for all the great response I got on the last chapter =) For a few days I was even on page 2 of what's hot, talk about surreal! Thank you so much, and I really, really appreciate all the comments and votes.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

He nodded slowly, miserably. "So... what now?" He asked thickly

And I knew he meant without even having to hear the words.

"You said we were friends..." I said slowly. "...and we still are. I won't leave you just because..." I trailed off again, gesturing between us.

I managed a shaky smile, though I knew it didn't reach my eyes, and I knew he could tell. Still, he fought to return it.

I turned away before he could see the tears that refused to be blinked back. I felt, if anything, worse than before. Yes I

was glad that he was staying, but at what cost? Would he end up resenting me anyway because of what I'd just done?

Wordlessly, we each took our reins and trudged slowly on towards the castle, shielded by the shadows of the night that could, for a moment, mask all our misery and doubts.

Chapter 25 - Home Sweet Home

The sun had disappeared, leaving no lingering rays of light or heat in its wake. It seemed also to have taken all sound with it.

Skirting the edge of the village, there was no sounds of the night life of the townsfolk. Everything was quiet and still, with not even the hint of a breeze to stir the dust up from the roads.

The silence lay thick, like a blanket over the town and was an almost eerie presence that accompanied us to the castle.

The only evidence of life came from our own gentle steps down the cobblestone paths. Our shadows could barely be distinguished from the surrounding darkness, and the pale silvery light of the moon ducked in and out from between the houses, barely illuminating a strip of the road before disappearing again. It would have all been much more disconcerting had we not been home.

The atmosphere matched our grim moods, even seemed to taunt us as we reached our destination. The faint clip-clop of the horses' hoofs seemed almost deafening to me as it echoed between the buildings, lost to the night.

I disliked being at the edge of town. I longed to be in the city square surrounded by the tireless merchants who sold their counterfeit wares in the dead of night. I missed the sickly sweet smell of roasting apples and cider filling the air with its pungent and intoxicating aromas, even the sounds of forbidden lovers meeting in the shadows of doorways and closed up shops for a few stolen seconds together.

Anything would be better than this taunting silence. Whatever turmoil we had both experienced, it seemed to have leaked out to the surroundings, tainting it with bitter emptiness.

The loneliness crept under my skin making it tingle uncomfortably. I hated the state of things between us now. The quiet didn't help, only made it easier for the icy numbness to spread through me. I wished I could break the silence but didn't know how.

I kept my eyes to the road ahead never once letting my gaze wonder to the Prince for fear that he might be looking back.

It was a struggle just walking beside him; the guilt tore at me incessantly, but more even than that was the regret.

If that had been the end of something more between us I wish it had lasted longer. And now here we were stuck in this awkward situation and I didn't know what to do.

Things would always be different between us now, no more of the easy banter and innocent teasing.

The realization of that stunning loss tugged at my heart strings painfully. Maybe back at the castle the tension would be lifted, since we'd no longer spend so much time together. I could only hope the tension would lift. And yet it was a

bittersweet victory if it came at the cost of our newfound friendship.

Caught up in my thoughts as I was, I barely stopped myself from running into the Prince, who had stopped before the castle entrance. He faced the door resolutely and I waited behind him since he blocked the way.

He lifted a hand to push it open, but then hesitated and whirled around to face me. The sudden move had me taking a quick step back.

Wordlessly, he searched my expression intently for something. Though I didn't know for what, I made sure to keep my features carefully blank. I focused my eyes just past his head to the intricate carvings on the door behind him so that my eyes wouldn't betray me either.

He studied me a moment longer before finally sighing and breaking the silence that had stretched between us.

I could feel his eyes burning through me but couldn't hold his gaze, the seriousness of his expression making me worry.

"Before we go in... I want to make sure that nothing's changed between us" He said slowly, being sure to enunciate each word.

My voice replied steady and calm, not letting on to the numbness that had been slowly spreading through me.

"Of course it hasn't Johnathan" I lied easily.

I caught the grimace on his face and reluctantly met his eyes, faking nonchalance to gesture at the door behind him.

He didn't move, or even acknowledge my request, but I saw his face falter, and then fall.

"You're lying, you're treating me differently already" He whispered.

I forced a half smile onto my face. "What do you mean?"

He looked away from me. "You just called me Johnathan. You

call me that" He said sadly.

I cringed slightly, cursing myself for making such a stupid mistake. He was right of course; I'd never called him by his full name before.

I sighed heavily "John, I--"

He shook his head, stopping me from continuing.

"I know what happens next" He said bitterly "You're going to start avoiding me, only talking politely to me, it's going to be even worse than before, and that too after you said we were friends."

I opened my mouth to say something, and closed it right back up. After all, what could I say when he was exactly right? I looked away guiltily having been thinking the same things only moments ago.

"Why?" He whispered, even quieter than before "Didn't you mean what you said?"

"I did... at the time... but then I thought about it... and... I just don't want to make this harder for you."

Or me, I silently added.

I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, afraid to see what they showed.

He was probably angry, with good reason. I'd had time to think about it and it seemed like the right thing, no, the only thing to do. How could he get over me if I was always around? How could I get over

if I was always around?

I felt his hands grasp my shoulders.

"Look at me Cece" He said evenly.

Reluctantly I met his gaze, but couldn't find a trace of anger there. He looked calm, if a little hurt.

"I know what you're thinking, but you can't protect me from this."

I studied him uncertainly, but there were no more lines of tension on his face, none of the earlier conflict.

"Why can't I?"

He smiled ruefully "I'm a big boy Cece, I can handle rejection. But if you try and ignore me...." He threatened teasingly, softening the intensity of the moment.

I rolled my eyes at him, but couldn't keep from smiling. "What? You'll run away again?"

He pretended to think about it and his smile grew wider "I might... and I'll take you captive" He added smugly.

A chuckle escaped me. "Fine, I won't ignore you, but if you annoy me too much--"

"You

can't ignore me"

I pouted and pretended to think about it. "Can I beat you with my sword then?"

He laughed "Only if I can fight back."

"Deal."

He held his hand out for me to shake on it, and I felt instant relief that things could go back to a semblance of normal. It made me feel better knowing I wouldn't have to lose him. It was an even greater comfort having a conversation so like the one's I'd grown used to. Even if what had happened couldn't be forgotten, at least it didn't have to change things too much.

I tried to pull my hand away but he held on looking at me seriously.

"You can't change your mind you know. You can't just wake up tomorrow and forget this conversation ever happened. You're stuck with me."

I made a face at him and faked a horrifed expression making him laugh.

He let go then and turned to face the door. He ran his hand through his hair once and pushed it slowly open, waving me in.

"Home sweet home" He muttered as I walked past him.

***

We were stopped just as we entered the main hallway by a gasp of surprise.

Spinning left I saw a castle attendant staring at us in shock. He bowed hastily when we turned to face him.

"Prince Johnathan, well I'll be, back from your travels in the dead of night?" He asked curiously.

John smiled, obviously lost.

Maybe I should have filled him in on the cover story his father had created.

He looked to me anxiously, trying to buy some time and ran a hand through his hair. I mouthed for him to play along and he nodded slightly.

"It's all thanks to Cece here for delaying me" He said while throwing an arm around my shoulders playfully.

I glared at him for drawing the attention of the attendant to me.

He looked at us in surprise, probably wondering at our camaraderie. Although I didn't know the man personally, everyone at the castle knew of our dislike for each other. And since he thought John had been off gaining field experience and I had been at my sister's it must be something of a mystery to him.

"Lady Celia, I'm pleased you found an escort back to court."

He still sounded a bit confused, but did a good job of masking it.

"Yes it was quite the coincidence" I said smoothly.

He still looked puzzled at our late arrival, but I suppose he was taking it rather well.

"Would you by any chance know where my father is?" John asked.

He blinked in surprise, as if he'd forgotten where he was and then gestured for us to follow him.

Once his back was turned I elbowed John to make him move his arm and he pouted at me.

"People don't know where we've been, or that we get along, can we not make it

obvious?" I hissed quietly.

He rolled his eyes at me but didn't argue, for once.

As we walked down the halls I could hear the sounds of quiet chatter and laugher behind the closed doors. I smiled to myself, realizing how much I'd missed such little things as that.

Of course every room was filled, hosting the girls and young men who had traveled here for the High Ball in one weeks' time.

I sighed remembering that I would have to participate this year, but pushed it out of my mind when I found us standing in front of the doors to the library.

The attendant turned to us. "Shall I announce you my Prince?"

"That's quite alright."

He nodded and bowed to us before walking back down the hall, disappearing behind a corner.

John sighed. "Well, I suppose it's now or never."

I stepped around him, since he didn't look like he would be making a move anytime soon, and pushed open one of the heavy oak doors into the library.

My eyes settled upon a group in the middle of a heated discussion. John's father was accompanied by my parents and two castle guards, all of them gathered closely around the fireplace, oblivious to our interruption.

I inched the door open further and it made a loud groaning noise attracting their attention.

John and I stood awkwardly facing our parents for a moment while they all stared at us in shock.

It was my father who broke the stalemate, his face lighting up into a smile.

"Celia!" He opened his arms wide and I rushed forward, embracing him in a tight hug. He opened one arm and my mother joined us as we huddled together smiling.

I looked over my father's shoulder to see that the guards had moved off to the side while John had moved to stand before his father stiffly.

The King didn't make a move towards the Prince and I looked between father and son anxiously. I could see the tension rising between them, anger from the King matched against the defiance of the Prince. I knew neither of them felt the emotions they showed but were too proud to admit it. I rolled my eyes, boys.

I pulled away from my parents and cleared my throat, catching John's attention, and glared at him in annoyance.

He sighed and turned back to the King, taking a step closer.

"Dad I--"

He was cut off as his father pulled him into a rough bear hug.

I laughed and my dad squeezed my shoulder. I smiled up at him, and saw a curious expression on his face that matched the one of the attendant earlier. Well, I guess they'd all find out sooner or later that we got along now; John wasn't likely to hide it for long.

When they finally stepped back from each other, both had more relaxed poses.

The King turned to me next with a smile on his face. I grinned and went to give him a hug before stepping back to stand by John.

He then looked to the guards and I followed his gaze to see that both had smiles on their faces at the happy reunion.

One of them stepped forward and bowed. "Well Sire, I guess our services in this matter are no longer needed."

"No indeed, the crisis has been pleasantly averted" He said with a nod in our direction.

John and I smiled at each other slightly while the King waved the guards out.

As the door closed behind them he turned back towards us and looked directly at me.

"Celia, I guess I have you to thank for bringing my son home."

I shook my head. "I can't take the credit for that uncle, he decided to come back on his own" I said smiling proudly.

He raised an eyebrow and looked between us sceptically, but neither of us elaborated.

"Well, be that as it may John, you won't be getting off the hook so easily."

"Aww, dad, come on."

"Nope, you're grounded until the High Ball; I don't want to see you out of your room until then."

"You're grounding me?! But I'm twenty-one!"

"Well, you're actions speak otherwise."

I fought to hold back a laugh earning me a light shove from John.

"But daaadddd."

"You can 'but dad' me all you like son, so long as you do it in your room."

He looked down glumly and the King turned his head slightly in my direction to give me a wink. I hid a smile, poor John; he thought his dad was serious.

I yawned loudly, and no wonder, it must be only hours away from dawn by now.

"Well, goodnight everyone" I said sleepily.

I hugged my parents and the King goodnight before nodding to John.

"I'll walk you" He said and turned to head out the door before I could protest.

I shrugged, pretending not to notice the looks of the King and my parents, and followed him out.

I yawned again, dragging my feet along the floor and savouring the hard marble tiles beneath me.

John obviously thought I was right behind him, but my steps continued to slow down into long slow strides, letting him get further ahead. I wondered when he would notice I wasn't beside him anymore...

1...

2...

3...

4...

There we go.

He turned around in confusion and saw me lagging behind. I gave him a lazy smile and he laughed backtracking to fall in step with me.

When we stood side by side again he linked his arm through mine and pulled me along cheerfully.

No fair, why was he so awake while I was so tired?

"What are you so happy about? You're grounded" I smirked.

He started mumbling under his breath until I shoved him, but, forgetting that we had our arms linked, I lost my balance as well.

He used his free arm to steady me and laughed lightly, shaking his head at me.

"You could have said something in there you know." He continued pulled me along down the hall.

"You're right, I should have suggested he ground you for two weeks, one isn't nearly enough."

"Gee, thanks" He said sarcastically.

I smiled, knowing he couldn't see and leaned my head against his arm. It worried me how comfortable I was starting to feel around him.

He looked surprised and smiled slowly, but didn't say anything more until we reached my room.

We stood apart, facing each other.

"Well, goodnight then" I said softly

"Night Cece, try not to pine for me too much while I'm locked away in my tower for the next week."

I laughed at the fake forlorn expression on his face. And what 'tower' was he talking about? How over dramatic, and yet so typically John. I smiled.

"I don't 'pine' John, I'll just have to break you out if I miss you too much" I teased.

He laughed "Now

I would love to see."

The Last Dance (26)

Hello, so sorry for the long wait, I was having a bit of writers block but then I just started writing and got back on track.

So now, not only is this chapter finally up, the next is almost finished too, so if you want it fast be sure to comment and vote!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

We stood apart, facing each other.

"Well, goodnight then" I said softly

"Night Cece, try not to pine for me too much while I'm locked away in my tower for the next week"

I laughed at the fake desolate expression on his face. And what 'tower' was he talking about?

How over dramatic, and yet so typically John. I smiled.

"I don't 'pine' John, I'll just have to break you out if I miss you too much" I teased.

He laughed "Now THAT I would love to see"

Chapter 26 - Catching Up

I woke up feeling unbelievably refreshed after a night in my own bed. The ground just didn't compare, even under the light of the stars.

I got up slowly, savouring the light that filtered through the window and lit up the room in a sunburst of colors.

Standing up I made my way to the window and pulled open the blinds, letting the heat and light flood my room. I was surprised that it was well past sunrise, and almost around noon. I guess I had been more tired than I thought.

I continued taking my time getting dressed; happily throwing aside the dratted skirts I'd been forced to wear over the last days. It felt good being able to don the loose comfortable practice clothes I was so used to.

The hallways were empty of guests at this late hour and I assumed the new residents would be down at the market occupying themselves. For many young women this would be their first time at court, surely a big difference from the little fiefs they had grown up in.

I was grateful for the quiet but surprised that Mira and Lily hadn't come to find me yet; I knew word got around fast in the castle.

I turned my steps towards the mess hall, the most likely place to run into a familiar face.

"Cee!" I grinned at the ring of the familiar voice of one of my best friends.

"Lil'!"

We rushed towards each other and embraced into a bone crushing hug.

"I missed you!"

"Me too."

"How is everything? You have to catch me up on all the court gossip" I said with a grin.

Who ever thought I would miss the latest castle intrigue?

She giggled and raised an eyebrow at me. "Please Cee, I'd so much rather hear about your trip, stuck with John for all this time!"

"Wait, you knew about that?"

She rolled her eyes at me "Well of course we knew; the King wouldn't try fooling us about you staying at Anna's while the Prince was on the field. So what was it like?"

I shrugged "It wasn't so bad. Nothing special."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You mean you two got along? Oh, now this I definitely need to hear, as soon as we find Mira."

With that she grabbed my arm and started towing me down the hall. I found myself standing before the doors to the library for the second time in just a few hours.

Before I could say a word Lily had pushed open the door and shoved me inside.

"I'll be right back so don't you go anywhere" She warned.

I laughed and headed deeper into the room.

The door slammed shut behind her and I was left alone.

I took a deep breath, letting the smell of dusty books wash over me. I walked down an aisle, running my hand along the spines as I took in the familiar names. Now here was a place I wouldn't mind being stuck in for a week.

I turned around slowly at the sound of the door opening and made my way back to the chairs around the fire.

Mira and Lily were deep in conversation when they saw me and cut of mid sentence. Mira smiled and ran over to give me a hug.

We pulled the chairs close together and sat down.

"Alright go" Mira said excitedly.

"Go where?" I joked.

The rolled their eyes in exasperation. Lily opened her mouth to say something, but shut it quickly, her eyes widening.

Before I could ask what it was she had grabbed my wrist and pulled it towards her, almost pulled me off the chair in the process.

They ohhed and ahhed over the bracelet while I smiled fondly at it, admiring the way the light made it sparkle and shine. It still never ceased to impress me with its beauty.

"When did you get it" Mira asked in wonder.

"It was a birthday gift" I said absently.

I only realized my mistake when their eyes turned up to me. I knew the next question before it left their lips.

"From who?" They asked in unison.

I felt my face heat up in embarrassment.

"It was umm... anonymous" Perfect, not even a lie.

"Oh please Cee, do you think we can't tell when you're lying?" Mira asked.

"Even

the fact that you're bright red wasn't giving it away" Lily added.

I sighed; they were going to get it out of me eventually, might as well just get it over with. And it might make it easier to explain my new friendship with John.

"Fine it was... from John" I mumbled quietly.

They heard nonetheless and their jaws dropped open in shock.

I fidgeted with the bracelet rather than meet their incredulous gazes.

My thoughts turned to John and I wondered where he was. Did he still think he was grounded? I bet he did. I really should go rescue him. Well, as soon as I was done catching up with my friends. A few more hours in his room wouldn't hurt.

I shook my head, that damn Prince had me missing him already.

"Are we still talking about the same Prince here?" Lily asked dubiously.

I tried to erase the silly grin off my face with no luck.

"I know... I hardly believed it myself. He's not even the one who told me, if I hadn't run into the merchant he'd bought it from I still might not know."

"Why would he buy it though?"

"I don't know... I don't even think

knows why."

We lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

I played with the bracelet, letting it catch the light from the sun. When I looked up again it was to see Mira staring at me with her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

I immediately let go and bit my lip wearily; it was too much to hope she hadn't noticed.

"You like him though don't you?"

Lily's eyes shot up in surprise, and she cocked an eyebrow.

I groaned internally, did she have to be so blunt about it?

That led to a whole mess of questions I wasn't ready to deal with. What was it about friends that they

seem to know what you're not telling them?

They were both staring at me intently, waiting for an answer. I could easily say no, or just say that it was only him who liked me, and it was unreciprocated.

I could, but I'd be lying, and for some reason unknown to me I didn't feel right keeping this a secret from them.

I nodded slowly and braced myself for their protests but none came. How could they take it so calmly when I could barely admit it to myself?

When they didn't say anything I decided it was up to me to break the silence.

"I shouldn't though" I said slowly "Not after everything he's done... right?"

The thought had been bothering me for a while now.

Lily looked thoughtful. "Well, I don't know about that. It seems like one of those things where it shouldn't work, but it does."

"I agree. You're personalities complement one another. And personally, I think you'd be bored with anyone else" She added with a grin.

"That's all well and good, but it's not like we'll ever be more than friends" I said sadly.

"Why, doesn't he like you too?"

"Well he better, he did kiss me" I mumbled.

This time I had to laugh at their shocked expressions. Bet they didn't see that coming.

"That doesn't sound like just friends" Mira said with a smirk.

"Definitely not!"

I shifted uncomfortably. Here's where things got difficult.

"It's more complicated than that."

"Then tell us."

"Right. Start from the beginning."

I started from the day after my birthday, when I'd first gotten the bracelet, and told them about the duel with its rematch and his apology after.

They looked surprised at that but I continued on, knowing if I stopped I might not be able to go on. Unlike when I'd told the story to Sir Corry, I skimmed over the main parts of what happened and talking about what went on between us the whole time.

I looked towards the empty fireplace while I talked so I wouldn't have to see their expressions. I told them everything up until the kiss, but didn't elaborate on it; it felt too precious to share.

Finally I met their gazes again and went on about what happened after the kiss, our talk outside the castle doors, and how I'd told him we could only be friends, letting him think I didn't feel the same way about him.

By the end they were both looking at me in exasperation.

"Why on earth would you let him think you didn't like him?"

"Don't you understand? I can't be queen, I can't live that life! If he knew how I really felt he'd never agree to someone else."

"But is being queen worse than seeing someone else be with him Cee?" Mira asked gently.

I buried my face in my hands. That question had been repeating itself in my head for days. I lifted my head weakly, not wanting to cry over that question again.

"We've only really gotten to know each other for the past two weeks. And even then it's been like treading over glass. I don't know what it would be like to really

with him. I don't want to rush into this; I don't want to lose what we already have. I know there's something there, but it's too early to tell how strong it is. What if it doesn't work? I can't risk that"

They didn't say anything, and after all, what could they say? I knew I'd managed to convince them, even if I wasn't fooling myself.

Did I care about him? Yes, absolutely yes. I could see that now. I could also see that it could be so much more, and that's what scared me.

I'd spent years learning to physically and emotionally protect myself from John. Letting him in now wasn't an easy thing for me to do. It was almost a natural instinct to push him away if he got too close.

Lily finally broke the tense mood, making some joke about the Prince, and the atmosphere between us lightened considerably. We talking easily after that, talking about what had gone on in the castle and I told them about our friends from the forest.

It was an hour past noon when we finally ran out of news to share and decided to make our way towards the cafeteria

for a late lunch.

"Say, where is the Prince anyway? I haven't seen him all day."

I froze in my tracks. I'd forgotten all about him being grounded, taking for granted that someone would have told him. Did no one really tell him?

Mira noticed I wasn't behind them and shot me a curious look.

"I'm going to go find him."

Lily and Mira exchanged a look before leaving me alone in the hall.

I made my way towards the royal wing of the castle and found it empty of inhabitants. The only sound was the slap of my leather boots against the hard tile floor.

When I reached his room I slowly pushed open the door checking if he was still in there.

He was lying on his bed facing the ceiling and so engrossed in a book he didn't even notice my entrance. I had to smile. Guess he wasn't taking his grounding to badly.

I leaning against the door frame and cleared my throat.

His eye flickered over and he immediately sat up hiding the book behind him in embarrassment.

I smirked at him "So this is where you've been all morning, and here I'd hoped you were up to something interesting."

He smiled and looked past me, as if checking that no one else was there. Oh right, he still thought he was grounded.

"What are you doing here?" He whispered.

I decided to have a little fun with this and pouted at him. "What? Aren't you happy to see me?"

He rolled his eyes "Of course I am, but that doesn't explain--
"

I cut him off by walking over to where he was and snatching the book from behind his back.

"Even worse than I thought, you've been in here reading!" I said in mock horror.

He laughed and raised an eyebrow at me. "So? There's nothing more attractive than intelligence" He said, repeating the words I'd once said to him weeks ago when he'd found my clearing.

I smiled, surprised that he'd remembered, and nodded my head at him. "Touché"

"So really, what are you doing here?"

I gave him a pointed stare; he should already know the answer to this. "I came to break you out obviously," I said when he continued to look confused.

He stared at me suspiciously before his face slowly broke into a grin.

"So I guess that means you missed me then" He said cheerfully before walking over and throwing an arm around my shoulders.

I shrugged it off and walked out the door.

He laughed and caught up to me, putting his arm back around my shoulders. "You didn't deny it" He teased.

"I'm just used to having you around, that's all" I said nonchalantly.

He rolled his eyes at me "Sure, that's it."

I tried to push his arm off again but he only tightened his grip, smiling innocently down at me all the while.

I sighed loudly, making him laugh, but let him keep it there. For now at least, since there was no one else around.

We walked down the hallways and I couldn't help but notice John looking around every few minutes. I couldn't help but smirk.

"What's wrong John, afraid of getting caught? You could always go back."

He scoffed and pulled his eyes back to face forward. "Please, I'm not afraid, who's going to say anything to the Prince?"

I stopped mid step and tilted my head to the side. "Did you hear that?"

"Where?"

He couldn't mask the hint of panic in his face and ducked behind me. Not the best hiding place since he was much taller than me.

I could only hold my straight face for a moment before I burst out laughing.

"Quiet Cece, they'll hear you" He hissed behind me.

This was so priceless.

I was bent over laughing, holding onto my knees for support while he continued to unsuccessfully hide behind me, begging me to keep it down.

"John... there's... no... one... there" I said between laughs.

He immediately straightened up and walked around to stand in front of me while crossing his arms.

"Why'd you do that?" He asked with a slight frown.

I tried to stand up as well, but it wasn't working very well.

"To see... your... reaction... of course!"

He grabbed my shoulders, practically holding me up.

"So you mean to tell me..."

He walked forward making me back up since he still held me at arms distance.

"...you made up hearing someone..."

I felt myself back up against the wall, unable to go any further. His eerily calm voice worried me. I wasn't sure whether he was mad or not.

"...just to see my reaction?" He finished.

I smiled nervously, my laughter long gone, while he took another step forward shortening the distance between us.

His hands moved to rest against the wall on either side of my face, trapping me in place while he leaned over me.

I forgot my witty remark, instead getting flustered by the intense look in his eyes that I couldn't turn away from.

"I... umm... well..."

I trailed off as he took yet another step closer, closing the distance between us so that his chest pushed me gently against the wall.

"That wasn't very nice" He whispered.

I gulped suddenly feeling my throat go dry as his head leaned closer, his eyes a swirling vortex of melted chocolate that pulled me closer.

My eyes flickered down to his lips and I found myself tilting my face closer to his.

He was going to kiss me again.

He leaned in closer leaving only an inch of space between us.

I could still stop him, it wasn't too late yet, but I knew I wasn't going to.

I was going to let him do it. I even found myself wanting him to.

He was moments away from pressing his lips to mine...

Footsteps echoed close by causing John to jump guiltily away from me.

His face was bright red and I knew mine looked the same.

It was just then that one of the castle maids came into sight. Her steps slowed down as she looked between us curiously. I

could only imagine how this must look. We were this close to...

I bit my lip hard trying to look as innocent as possible.

As she neared us she curtsied.

"You're Highness, Lady Celia"

I could hear the edge of suspicion in her voice and prayed word of this wouldn't get spread around. After all, we weren't actually doing anything. Though if she'd come even a moment later... no, I wasn't going to think about that.

John jerked his head in a nod and I smiled tightly at her before she walked past us and turned the corner.

I blew out the breath I had been holding and saw John do the same.

He ran his hand through his hair nervously. I eased myself away from the wall.

"So... how about some air?" He asked cautiously.

I nodded and we turned our steps towards the main doors, keeping a considerable distance between us.

Before we'd even gotten to the end of the hall, John froze mid step and started mumbling under his breath.

I took a hesitant step closer to hear him cursing.

"What's wrong?" I winced slightly when my voice came out shaky.

His head snapped up in surprise.

"What? Oh, it's-- I have to go" He said frantically.

"Go where? Did what almost happen make things weird between us again?"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Not a chance" He said more seriously than I expected.

"I meant I need to get back to my room before that maid tells my dad. I'm in so much shi-- trouble."

I rolled my eyes at him, feeling relieved it was nothing to do with us.

"Alright one, you can swear in front of me John I'm not some delicate court lady."

He smiled slightly.

"And second, you don't have to go anywhere, you're not even grounded."

"Oh alrig-wait, WHAT?"

I took a startled step back, not expecting his voice to come out angry.

The Last Dance (27)

Thanks for all the awsome and nice comments last chapter! This long chapter is espeically for you, so everyone else should thank you as well for commenting lol

So, as most of you have figured out this story is getting closer to the end, and I wish it wasn't, but I don't want to just add any random twist to make it longer and risk ruining the storyline.

Anyway since it IS wrapping up soon I want as many votes for the story as I can get so can you please go back and vote for any chapters you haven't, or for those that haven't voted at all please do. Thanks in advance =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

"I meant I need to get back to my room before that maid tells my dad. I'm in so much shi-- trouble"

I rolled my eyes at him, feeling relieved it was nothing to do with us. "Alright one, you can swear in front of me John I'm not some delicate court lady" He smiled slightly.

"And second, you don't have to go anywhere, you're not even grounded"

"Oh alrig-wait, WHAT?"

I took a startled step back, not expecting his voice to come out angry.

Chapter 27 - Kiss and Make Up

"What do you mean I'm NOT grounded?" He tried to ask calmly but I could still hear the anger behind his words and fidgeted nervously.

"John, your dad wasn't serious about that" I whispered.

His eyes widened, and for a brief moment I saw the old John.

"And you didn't come and get me until past noon?"

"Well I-I meant to come earlier but I ran into Mira and Lily and I lost track of time..." I finished lamely.

He didn't look pleased.

Not at all.

And where was this nervousness of mine coming from anyway? Since when was I scared of John?

"Oh, well, sorry I'm such an inconvenience" He said coldly.

"That's not what I meant John I--"

"You shouldn't have even bothered coming if it was

much trouble, you could have just sent someone else" He said cutting me off.

Where was this even coming from? "You're overreacting--"

"I am

overreacting. You're the one who cares so little about me that you could just

about me in a room all morning"

"That's not

--" I pleaded, but it was hopeless. He wasn't listening to a word I was saying.

With one last pained look he shoved past me, hard, making me stumble back while he disappeared.

I blinked back tears of frustration and hurt. What the hell just happened here? Not five minutes ago he was about to kiss me, and then

.

I knew it.

I knew things would never last when we got back.

And he just proved me right. Didn't even give me a chance to explain or apologize or anything. Not that I had any reason to.

How was I supposed to know he would be so upset by it? He didn't exactly look like he was dying of boredom in his room.

And

could he say I didn't care? How many times was he going to make me prove that I did care?

I swallowed hard. He shouldn't have been able to hurt me like this anymore.

The worst part of it all was that even if

could go back to hating me so easily, I couldn't. I couldn't just forget the last two weeks so easily.

I wanted to find him right now and force him to listen to me, but my pride wouldn't allow it.

I told myself he was just acting on his hurt, that's all. He would get over it wouldn't he? He just needed to cool off and then he would realize he blew things way out of proportion.

Right?

This was so pathetic. When had I come to this?

John's POV

I stormed outside, fuming. How could she do that?

How could she just forget about me the second we got home?

I was actually starting to think she cared about me. I guess I was wrong.

She didn't even take me seriously.

First she made up hearing someone just so I would make a fool of myself. And that's exactly what I did. I bet she

enjoyed that. And then when the game was over she finally told me I wasn't even in trouble.

She must just think of me as some stupid Prince that she could mess around with, and that hurt like hell.

To think I was almost going to kiss her again. It's a lucky thing that maid came by when she did because Celia probably wouldn't have let it happen anyway. She was probably just waiting to laugh in my face about it.

I don't know what comes over me when I'm around her. What is it that makes me want her to like me so badly?

Maybe it's just because she's the only one who tries so hard not to.

Every lady who's come to court has tried to talk to me, not one of them sincere. They all flaunt their finest gowns and most expensive jewellery like some kind of showcase.

Granted, they were pretty, but Celia beat all of them without even trying. She even went out of her way to look as little like them as possible, and could still outshine them all in her plain training clothes.

She didn't even know it. Didn't even realize where her beauty came from, but I saw it more and more everyday. She even made walking seem like an art, the way she glided along as if she was floating on clouds.

Oh hell, how did she have me thinking about her this way?

Who was I even fooling trying to be friends? It wasn't enough, it could never be enough. Her and I, we just weren't cut out for that.

Stop it John, just stop it, you're supposed to be

at her I silently chastised.

Exactly. Forget how sweet her laughter sounds and remember she was only laughing at your idiocy.

I kicked at a tree trying to get rid of some of my frustration.

"Well, I guess someone's happy to be home" A voice said sarcastically from behind me.

I turned around with a frown to see David and Luke walking towards me.

"Oh look David, he's just the way we left him, same scowl and everything" Luke said cheerfully.

"You know that's funny Luke, because I thought he was working it out with our Cee."

"I can hear you" I said through clenched teeth.

"Well my friend, that generally

the point."

I scowled at them not in the mood for their jokes. The both exchanged and look and raised their eyebrows at me.

"My, who's got your Royal panties in such a bunch?"

"Who else?" I said kicking at the tree again. I didn't even know who I was angry at anymore, her or myself.

David sighed, finally looking serious.

"I don't get it John, I saw Mira a little while ago and she said you two were finally getting along."

"We were... but I don't want to

get along" I mumbled, finally feeling defeated.

I looked up to see them both giving me weird looks; right before they burst out laughing.

"What? What's so funny?"

"I just... can't believe it... that's all" David said between laughs.

"Our little Johnny... fell... for Cee! How cute" Luke said while making kissy faces at me.

If only he knew how close his little taunt was.

I felt myself turning red with embarrassment and shoved him into David so that they both fell on the ground. Unfortunately it did nothing to stop their laughter.

Ugh! And what was up with everyone today? How come I seemed to be the only one

finding things funny?

"Can you guys

! It's not 'cute', and it's definitely not

"

"Oh, but it is" David said with amusement while standing up from the ground and dusting himself off.

"You're so lovesick you don't even realize it" Luke said with a grin and threw his arm around me jokingly. I shrugged him off and stormed a few steps off.

I realized it alright. I was probably as lovesick as they got. Next thing you know I'd be writing poems. Now that would really have her laughing at me I thought angrily.

"Yeah? Well that all ended about five minutes ago" I said bitterly instead.

"Come on, what could she possibly have done that was so bad?" Luke demanded, going rapidly from smile to scowl.

I sighed; this was almost too shameful to even repeat. But what could I do now but follow my stupid tantrum through? I couldn't very well say I was angry because I liked her too much for my own damn good.

"I thought I was grounded, but she knew I wasn't. And not only did she abandon me in there for half the day, she let me keep thinking I was going to get in trouble so I would make a fool of myself while she just laughed. Kind of like what

guys keep doing. Some friends" I mumbled quietly.

"Ah, poor Johnny, you gonna break up with us too?" Luke said with a fake pout.

I shoved him again and he stumbled back, laughing. This time though I didn't have the satisfaction of seeing him trip to the ground.

David rolled his eyes at me. "Is that it? You really are an idiot John"

"You're supposed to be on

side" I said, annoyed despite myself.

"Did you even hear what you just said? You're getting mad over nothing. She was with Mira and Lily as soon as she woke up and came to get you right after."

"But--"

"And as for the rest of it, you damn well know you would have done the same thing. She was just teasing you, not trying to hurt you. And knowing you, you were probably a huge ass about it."

I opened my mouth to deny it, but no words came out. He was right, at least partially. I wasn't even mad about that. It was everything else, but this morning just... tipped me over the edge. And there's no doubt I

a huge ass about it.

Shit.

"I might have overreacted a little..." I said sheepishly.

They both rolled their eyes at me.

"Cee's a great girl John, and if you keep messing up like this she'll find someone else."

"No she wouldn't... would she?" I asked hesitantly.

"Look, its simple. Do you seriously like her?"

I ran a hand through my hair, but I didn't have to think about it. The answer was obvious, but admitting it out loud was another thing.

After a minute of silence Luke turned to David. "Well, if

doesn't want her then I call dibs."

My jaw dropped open as they turned toward each other, ignoring me altogether.

"Hey, no fair, I didn't know we were calling dibs."

"Well that's too bad because I just did."

Excuse me? No way would she pick them over me… right?

"Umm guys--" I tried cutting in, but they didn't even seem to hear me.

"But I want her too!"

"Guess you should have called dibs then."

"Guys!" I tried again to no avail

"Duel you for her?"

"No way! I called her fair and square."

"Fair my ass! I was trying to reason with Prince Blockhead over there."

"ALRIGHT" I yelled finally getting their attention. "I like her okay? Seriously like her. And no one gets to call dibs, or duel for her or anything because SHE. IS. MINE!"

They turned to each other with a smirk and slapped hands.

I felt my jaw drop for the second time. "Wait, you planned that?" I asked in disbelief.

"Well, more like winged it."

"Oh, don't give us that look, how else were we going to get you to admit it?"

"Now, go fix it" David said firmly.

I could only nod meekly in response.

Luke looked past us and his face brightened. "Celia!"

He and David waved cheerfully and ran past me. I turned around slowly, to see her waving back with a smile.

Luke reached her first and threw his arms around her in a hug. She laughed, hugging him back, and I felt a surge of jealously run through me.

I clenched my teeth until he let go, but just as soon as he did, she went to give a hug to David.

It hurt to watch. She never acted that relaxed around me.

I told myself to go over there, but I couldn't do it. She talked with them so easily, not like when she was with me. If I went over there now, I would probably only ruin it like I always seem to do.

She probably didn't even want to see me right now. I was only meters away but I might as well have been invisible for all she noticed.

With a last longing look in their direction I turned away, walking slowly towards the practice court.

I almost wished we were still on our 'adventure', at least then I wouldn't have to share her.

Celia's POV

He was right there.

Right there and still he refused to walk the few steps over to join us.

Was he still mad?

It didn't seem like it. His face seemed almost sad. I was only half listening to the guys, waiting to see if he would come. Instead he turned around and started walking away.

I sighed, and Luke stopped talking.

Luke glanced back and exchanged a look with David. He then glanced back too and swore softly under his breath. "Idiot Prince" He said quietly.

I didn't think I was supposed to hear it, so pretended I hadn't.

They exchanged another look, and I cleared my throat to get them to stop whatever silent conversation they seemed to be having.

David gave me a sheepish smile. "For what it's worth, we're sorry on his behalf" He said, jerking his head back in the direction John had gone.

Obviously John had already told them what had happened this morning. I shrugged. "It's okay, it's just... I don't know what I did that was so wrong"

Luke chuckled "You didn't do anything; Johnny's just feeling a little jealous"

I raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Jealous?

John?

Why would he be? That was just ridiculous.

"I think he's just afraid you don't like him as much as he obviously likes you" David said with a wink.

I felt myself blushing, surprised that he could say that so casually.

"But I don't think he has anything to be afraid of, do you?" He teased.

I only blushed deeper in response.

"So... I guess one of us should go after him" Luke said before they both turned to look at me.

I looked between them and saw the smirks on their faces.

"What? You want

to go after him?" I asked incredulously, and though I tried to mask it, nervously.

They nodded as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I shook my head "I don't think he wants to see me right now."

David rolled his eyes at me and pushing me gently in the direction he had gone. "Trust me, he does."

"Yeah, we've already made him feel properly ashamed" Luke added with a grin.

And with that they left in the opposite direction, expecting me to go after him.

Well, I suppose there was no harm in it if he wasn't going to yell at me anymore.

I sighed and made my way over to the practice courts where he had been heading.

I heard the sound of the sword before I saw him. He had his back to me and didn't seem to hear me when I approached.

I stayed where I was for a moment, watching him as he practiced some basic techniques with a sword. It was such an improvement from the way he used to fight. Every swing was more calculated and better controlled. I had to admit to being a little surprised that he'd taken my advice so seriously.

His hair seemed to sparkle in the light, turning it to that shade of molten gold I loved so much; so stunning it put real gold to shame.

He was handsome no doubt, though I'd never acknowledged it before, and even more so when he blushed, which he seemed to do a lot of around me. The thought brought a smile to my face.

Why he liked me when there were so many more ladylike girls out there was beyond me. Hadn't he always made fun of me for not being enough of a girl? And yet all those years of taunting didn't stop me from liking him now.

If it weren't for that quick temper of his he would be almost too good to be true. He was as gallant as any knight was meant to be and twice as sweet, even if he rarely let it show.

I walked around to the side as he came out of a difficult manoeuvre.

"You're getting really good" I said softly.

He turned around in surprise, his arms falling limply to his sides.

"Hi" His voice came out almost as a whisper.

"Hi" I replied, suddenly feeling nervous.

I stared at the ground, shifting about from foot to foot wondering what to say.

"I'm sorry" He blurted out.

I glanced up to see him looking at me sheepishly, a light blush coloring his cheeks. "I know I say that a lot but..."

I shook my head, cutting him off. "It's alright"

"No it's not" He said, running a hand through his hair. "I always seem to mess up around you" He mumbled.

"Not all the time, not even most of the time anymore."

We stood in silence for a while before he spoke again.

"So... why

you come and get me?" He asked hesitantly.

It took me a moment to realize he was referring to our fight earlier. I walked over to him while he watched me wearily, and took the wooden sword out of his hand.

"Because, for some reason unknown to me I actually missed your royal pain-in-the-ass self" I teased.

He smiled shyly "Really?"

I nodded and started swinging the sword around.

"So... I'm not just the annoying idiot Prince you put up with?" He asked hesitantly.

I watched him from the corner of my eye. "Oh, you're definitely an annoying idiot Prince"

I saw his face fall and continued with a slight smile. "But, you're my annoying idiot Prince" I said without looking at him.

He stood where he was for a moment, grinning like a little boy and blushing furiously, before walking into the practice shed and coming out with another wooden sword.

He watched my movements for a moment, before following them with his own sword, a faint smile still on his face.

The silence was comfortable, but there was still another question I wanted to ask.

"Why did you leave when Luke and David were talking to me?"

His movements faltered for a moment before picking up again.

He shrugged, looking a little sad. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"You never seemed to mind before" I pointed out.

He didn't reply right away, but when he did his voice was almost emotionless except for a trace of something else. "I never realized you were so close to them."

The words David had said earlier came to mind and I voiced them out loud. "Were you jealous?" I asked curiously, dropping my hands to my sides.

He stopped his swinging all together and faced me, meeting my eyes reluctantly. "You've never greeted me like that before."

What was he talking about? The fact that I'd hugged them? Well, of course, they were like brothers to me. Only, from the look on John's face, I guess he didn't know that. He must have thought I liked them better than him.

Oh.

I guess David knew what he was talking about. He had been jealous. How sweet.

I regarded him carefully for a moment before resuming my practice with the sword.

"That's because with them it doesn't mean anything."

He watched me in silence for a few minutes before speaking again.

"And... with me it... does?" He asked hesitantly.

I stopped again and looked over at him. He tried to keep his features blank, but I still noticed the anxious look in his eyes.

I walked up to him slowly and handed my sword to him by the hilt. He took it absently, watching me curiously.

Before I could talk myself out of it I stood up on my toes and lightly kissed him on the cheek. His face instantly turned red as I stepped away.

"What do you think?" I asked softly.

He looked too stunned to speak and I decided to give him a few minutes alone to recover.

I turned around, hiding a smile when I saw him reach a hand up and touch his cheek.

The Last Dance (28)

So, this story is getting closer to the end, and since it IS wrapping up soon I want as many votes for the story as I can get so can you please go back and vote for any chapters you haven't, or for those that haven't voted at all please do. Thanks in advance =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Recap:

_____

I walked up to him slowly and handed my sword to him by the hilt. He took it absently, watching me curiously.

Before I could chicken out I stood up on my toes and lightly kissed him on the cheek. His face instantly turned red as I stepped away.

"What do you think?" I asked softly.

He looked too stunned to speak and I decided to give him a few minutes alone to recover.

I turned around, hiding a smile when I saw him reach a hand up and touch his cheek.

Chapter 28 - Walking on Clouds

For the first time in weeks I was up before the sun.

Shadows played across the walls as I made my way across the cold stone floor, quickly getting dressed and collecting my sword from its place by my dresser.

I was half way to the door when I doubled back for my bow. I frowned, seeing that it had gathered a fine coat of dust from disuse. Finding an old cloth I wiped it down and slung in across my back, excited to get out to the archery field.

I inched the door slowly open to stop it from creaking and waking anyone else in the hall up; it was a practiced routine.

Taking a few steps out into the hall I half turned around to shut it before stopping in surprise. A figure was slumped against the wall, dozing lightly with deep even breaths. A smiled tugged up the corners of my lips as I shut the door with a slight bang and startled the Prince awake.

He jerked back and hit his head against the wall with a wince.

I stifled a laugh though I knew it shouldn't be funny. Still, the sight of him outside my room at this early hour was all kinds of ridiculous.

He looked up at me from where he was sitting on the ground and scowled when he saw the smirk I was sure covered my face.

"Sleep well?" I teased.

He started grumbling under his breath and rubbed the back of his head with a slight pout.

I reached a hand out and he grabbed hold of it, pulling himself up unsteadily.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I whispered curiously.

Not that I was complaining or anything, but it was definitely a surprise.

He yawned widely and ran a hand through his hair.

"I just happened to wake up early and figured I'd come practice with you" He said with another yawn before pointed behind him where his sheathed sword rested against the wall.

I raised my eyebrow at him. Just happened to wake up did he?

Was that why he was practically asleep on his feet?

Probably sensing I wasn't about to buy his story he reached out for his sword and clumsily tied it to his belt. I watched him fumble with the strap and start making his way down the hall.

He'd only gotten a few steps before realizing I wasn't behind him and turned around.

"Aren't you coming?"

I rolled my eyes though I knew he couldn't see in the darkened hallways, and walked to catch up with him.

I suspected his being here so early had something to do with yesterday, but I wouldn't push the subject. It was kind

of flattering that he would go through all the trouble of waking up just for me, especially since I knew he woke up well after most of the usual castle dwellers.

We pushed open the double doors and were immediately hit with an icy wind that made me shiver involuntarily.

The air had a damp heavy quality to it that only came after a light rain, and along with the cool breeze made for a chilly morning.

An idea struck me and I tugged on John's arm to keep him from heading towards the practice yards.

"Follow me, I want to show you something" I said, still feeling the need to whisper.

As we walked the air filled with the crisp smells of grass and wet soil.

A thin veil of mist hung low to the ground, swirling around my ankles and making the ground look like it was covered in a sheet of snow.

John had fallen a few steps behind, letting me lead the way to wherever we were going.

My feet traced the path around to the back of the castle where I always went when the weather was like this. It would be perfect at this time of morning I thought with a smile.

A maze of hedges began appearing over the mist as we made our way closer, as if they floated above the ground.

Nearby trees were heavy with blossoms in a mix of white, orange and pale pink, peeking in and out of the mist that

swirled higher around us. Closing my eyes for a moment it felt just as if I was walking on a cloud.

I walked past the first line of hedges that came up to my waist and let myself be enveloped in the rich smells that were at the same time sweet and spicy to make a heady scent more intoxicating than any perfume.

I glanced behind me to see John looking around in wonder and smiled excitedly.

Unlike when he'd stumbled upon my hidden forest glade, I was glad this time to share one of my favourite places with him.

Feeling my gaze John turned to me, his eyes still brimming with amazement.

"It's like a whole new place" He whispered, but I could hear him perfectly in the quiet around us.

I knew he realized right away that this place was important to me. I couldn't say what it was that had made me want to bring him here, but his smile just now made it completely worth it.

The hedge maze was no secret place, but there was something about coming here in the early morning that was unlike any other visit. It was rare to find it empty of inhabitants, which was why I only came at this hour when no one else was around.

I smiled and looked around. Really, I couldn't have picked better conditions to bring him here, the mist made the whole thing look ethereal and gave it a dreamlike quality.

"I like coming here to think sometimes in the morning... there's just something about it that clears all your thoughts" I murmured softly.

He seemed content just to be standing where he was, taking everything in, but there was still one more thing I wanted to show him.

With only a moment's hesitation I took his hand in mine and started pulling him further into the maze, tracing a familiar path that I could never get lost in.

I was surprised when he laced his fingers through mine and hoped he couldn't see the slight blush that coloured my cheeks.

I kept walked along the familiar winding path until I turned a last corner and came to a seemingly dead end.

Perfect.

John looked confused and tried turning back the way we came but I stopped him with a slight squeeze to our intertwined hands.

I walked towards the dead end, feeling the ground sloping steadily higher beneath my feet. As we reached the end a break in the hedges became visible, and I slipped through it carefully, pulling John behind me.

The maze stretched to either side of us, though we were no longer in it, and I walked the last few steps to a cobblestone bench, nearly hidden between the hedges.

I couldn't help but smirk at the surprised look on John's face. I had the same reaction when I'd first found this place, quite by accident.

The maze wasn't supposed to have any other exits besides the entrance, but the bench being here was obviously no coincidence.

I wondered how many others had found this place before, even though I always considered it my own.

We were at the top of a hill that looked out over the endless fields behind the castle and blended seamlessly into the line of trees that were hazy in the distance.

Even more perfectly, it faced directly east, giving the very best view of the soon to be rising sun.

With a certain amount of reluctance I started pulling my hand out of John's, only to have him tighten his grip.

Smiling slightly I sat down on the bench, pulling my legs up under my chin.

John sat beside me blinking sleepily though I could still see him trying to look everywhere at once, memorizing the sights.

The sky lightened gradually lending new warmth to the air as the sun peaked over the horizon.

The new heat shredded the mist into smoky tendrils and wisps that soon melted, leaving a sheen of moisture on our skin.

Fresh dew clung to each leaf and blade of grass, bringing the surroundings into high focus.

With each passing minute they glittered faintly in the dusty rays of light that continued to creep higher into the sky.

"This is incredible, it hardly even seems real" John said beside me, echoing my thoughts.

He turned to me with a faint smile. "No wonder you're always up before the sun."

We continued on in silence as the sky filled with swirls of pale yellow, dusty pink, burnt orange, and sparkling amethyst, and the clouds glowed with a silver lining. I'd missed this sight over the last weeks.

After a reminder from John I pointed out my favourite color to him, but all too soon time melted away as fast as the mist had.

I could already hear the first sounds of the castle awakening when I reluctantly got up and made my way out of the garden with John trailing behind.

"So John, ready to teach me those new tricks you learned in the forest?"

My voice seemed unnaturally loud after all that silence, but I felt refreshed and wide awake now, and was itching for some physical exercise.

He smirked and turned his steps towards the practice fields. "Why don't you see them in action first?"

Faster than I thought him capable of, John had drawn his sword and whirled around to face me.

I took a startled step back and grinned at the sparkle of excitement in his eyes.

I pulled out my own weapon while tossing my bow off to the side where it would be out of the way.

We were still at the back of the castle, but had plenty of open space for practice. This location seemed less likely to attract an audience, which was fine by me since it had never gone well in the past.

This time was different than before though; the last time we'd fought was out of anger whereas this time was completely relaxed and playful.

We circled around each other looking for an opening and already I could see that his weeks of practice had paid off.

I couldn't help but grin at his new easy confidence.

"You know John, if I wanted to dance..."

I quickly stepped forward and brought my sword down fast and hard. He met me half way into the swing before coming back with one of his own.

I could feel my eyebrows rise in surprise, while he laughed lightly and shot me a wink.

I grinned back; it seemed I'd underestimated him.

Before I had thought he lacked skill, now I could easily see he always had the skill, it was just his technique that needed work.

I didn't have time to think much after that since our first easy strikes turned into a flurry of blows I had to concentrate to keep up with.

Our swords moved against each other in such quick succession they blurred together. To my surprise we were very evenly matched. Each attack and block flowed seamlessly from one to another, always in constant motion.

I watched John carefully for every subtle sign that would hint at his next move just as I knew he studied me.

Unlike with Brice, John wasn't a bigger opponent and seemed to tire at the same rate as I was.

His newly learned calm attitude kept him from making silly mistakes and made him a much more difficult opponent.

Suddenly John stepped forward, while his sword swung around from the side. I only barely managed to sidestep and avoid the strike, circling him again wearily.

So that must have been one of his village tricks.

A good one too I might add, since his movements didn't betray his actions. But he wouldn't be able to use it again due to its one important flaw; having stepped so close for the move he had no choice but to follow it through.

It could only work if your opponent wasn't expecting it, as I hadn't. Now that I'd seen it, it wouldn't be effective, and for that reason I knew John wouldn't use it again.

We kept trading blows and every now and then I'd get surprised with a new move that I only barely managed to block. John tried to use those seconds of my confusion to gain an advantage but I was able to keep him back.

My arm was getting numb from the rain of clanging and my ears rung from the clashing swords.

I blinked a bead of sweat from my eyes and noticed too late the new step John had taken.

It was over in the blink of an eye.

I stared down at my sword in stunned disbelief. Without the clang of swords everything seemed unnaturally quiet, with only the sounds of our heavy breathing to disturb it.

Had I really lost?

To John?

It seemed almost surreal seeing it lying down in the grass glinting in the pale light of the sun.

I couldn't even remember the last time I'd been in this position.

I expected to feel angry maybe, or disappointed, but what I really felt was exactly the opposite.

When I looked up to face John he was still staring at my sword with much the same expression I must have had only moments ago.

His sword, dangling limply in his hand, fell from his grip and landed next to mine with a dull thud.

He slowly looked up at me, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Did you let me...?"

With a sudden rush of pride I couldn't explain I threw my arms around his neck in a tight hug.

His arms wrapped around my waist, though he stumbled backwards in surprise.

"Did I just...?"

I laughed, hugging him tighter.

"Yes you won! That was... you were amazing... I'm so proud of you John!" I said, failing to contain the excitement I felt.

I don't know what had come over me, to make me feel so giddy after having lost; and to John of all people.

He pulled away to look me in the eyes and I could see the hint of worry on his face.

"You're... not mad?" He asked uncertainly.

"No, but I

be if you don't teach me those new moves" I said cheerfully.

I picked up our swords from the ground and held his out but he only stared at it without taking it.

He looked up at me dubiously.

"You're seriously not upset? Even a little?"

I half smiled. "No John, you were good. Really good. I didn't know you were

good" I teased.

Finally a smile appeared on his face.

"Well, it's only because of you" He said shyly, taking his sword from me.

I shook my head at him. "I wish I could take credit for that, but I only gave you some advise and a few tips, the rest was all you."

He smiled for real this time and looked down at his sword like he was seeing it for the first time.

"All this time... I always thought... and I actually beat

" He said in wonder, jumping from one thought to the next.

I laughed and swung my sword in front of his face to get his attention.

"Well, you better enjoy it because it'll never happen again" I stated matter of factly.

He pouted at me. "I

enjoying it until you said that"

With a laugh I reached up and ruffled his hair.

He smiled and grabbed my wrist as I brought my hand down. I looked down in confusion as he grabbed my other hand and placed them both on the sword hilt.

He nudged my feet into the right place and gently turned my body to a slight angle.

Stepping in front of me, he mirrored my stance and led me through the manoeuvre and a few others after that.

We only kept at it for a little while, only going through each move once since we were worn out from our fight, and called it quits early.

The sun was well into the sky by now and I knew the castle grounds would be filling up, though none had made it around to the back of the castle where we had been practicing.

"So, do you want to go see who's made it down to the practice courts yet?" I asked casually.

John looked over at me sceptically.

"Don't tell me you

have energy to practice."

I shrugged; my earlier weariness was already starting to wear off. Years of working twice as hard as everyone else had really improved my stamina. And I never felt as energized as I did in the mornings.

"Shooting doesn't take much energy."

"It takes more than I have" He mumbled before going to pick up my bow from where I'd discarded it before.

With a resigned sigh he started walking towards the practice courts while I skipped along beside him, exaggerating my steps just to annoy him.

The noise from the courts reached us before they came into sight and already I could see more people milling around than was usual for this time of day.

We quickened our pace to see the fields come alive with dozens of bodies roaming around and an excited buzz filling the air.

I looked at John with confusion, but he was gazing out over the crowds and didn't seem to find it at all out of the ordinary.

"John, Celia!"

I turned at the sound of my name to see David and Luke walking up to us, with Mira and Lily close behind. I waved and started walking over to meet them halfway.

"Well look at that, so you two really

get along" David said with a smirk.

John came up behind me, laughing lightly, and rested his elbow on my shoulder.

"It helps when I remember to keep my mouth shut" He said with an easy grin.

Luke raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Well congrats Cee, you taught him more than we ever managed too."

I laughed and punched him playfully in the arm.

"He's easy to train if you know how" I said with a wink.

David shrugged and Luke smiled while the girls shot me knowing looks that I tried to ignore. All in all though, they acted as if John and I had been friends for years.

Feeling eyes on me I looked around to see that a few of the people around the courts had stopped to stare at us. When I met their gazes, most turned away, but others still stared openly.

I sighed, but it was nothing I wasn't expecting.

There would probably be a lot of staring for the next few weeks, especially with the High Ball coming up and our infamous reputation as castle enemies.

"I almost forgot, why are there so many people out here?"

I directed the question to David, figuring he would know since he'd been out here earlier, but it was John who

answered.

"Oh that's right, I meant to tell you; my dad's decided to hold a tourney this year, the day before the Balls start. It's that great?" He said excitedly.

He David and Luke began talking animatedly about entering the lists and betting who would make it farthest in the matches.

I grimaced slightly and stood closer to Mira and Lily, who were talking with just as much excitement about the Ball.

Great, both conversations I wasn't particularly interested in participating in.

"Why so quiet Cee? Aren't you excited? How far do you think you'll get?" David asked rapidly, without giving me a chance to answer anything.

"You know, I don't think I've ever actually seen you joust Cee, when do you practice?" Luke cut in.

I smiled lightly at them, about to answer when John cut in, a huge smirk covering his face...

The Last Dance (29)

Definite shout out to all the people who guessed what John's smirk was for; a few of you even got it right. Kudos! I had fun writing this chapter of course, but I can't wait for the next when I finally get to write about... the ball!! Yay! I'm sure you're all as excited as I am, or perhaps more since I actually know what's going to happen muahah. Enjoy!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Recap:

_____

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Chapter 29 - Tourney

"You want to tell them or should I?" He said gleefully.

Though I knew it was childish, I couldn't help but punch him lightly on the shoulder since he was obviously enjoying this way too much.

"Tell us what?" David asked suspiciously.

John looked at me once to see if I was going to say anything, and when it was obvious I wasn't his smirk grew even wider.

"Jousting is the one thing our Celia can't do."

I shrugged like it was no big deal when everyone's jaw dropped open.

Besides being a little embarrassed it wasn't a huge deal. No one could be good at everything, not even me, though it wasn't for lack of trying.

"How did you know about that anyway?" I asked John curiously while the others recovered.

He grinned. "I saw you attempt it once a long time ago. Priceless" He said with a chuckle.

I frowned. "You mean to say you saw me fail at something and

make fun of me for it?" I asked sceptically.

That didn't exactly fit with the impression I had of him before we became friends.

"I was going to, but then you looked so upset after I couldn't bring myself to do it" He said sheepishly.

I almost cringed, caring more that he'd seen me upset than being bad at something, until I remembered things had changed.

And even before they'd changed he'd had the decency not to do anything about it.

Impressive.

"You mean you actually had a heart back then?" I said with fake surprise.

He rolled his eyes at me even as a faint smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Shocking isn't it?" He said sarcastically.

That got a laugh out of the others, reminding me of their presence. Strange, I always seemed to forget people were around when I was talking to John.

"Well, come on then Johnny, let's go sign up on the lists" Luke said before dragging him away.

When they were far enough away Mira and Lily each grabbed a hold of one of my hands.

"While they are doing that,

have to go start picking out dresses for the ball."

My eyes widened and I immediately tried pulling away from them, ready to run away if I had to, but their grip on my hands stayed firm and kept me in place.

I pouted, trying to figure out what I could say to get out of this, as they forcibly pulled me in the direction on the castle.

"Is it really necessary to look

? The Ball is still a week away" I reasoned desperately.

The last thing I needed was an afternoon getting fitted for gowns and picking out colors. I shuddered at the thought.

Mira tsked at me while Lily shook her head.

"The Ball may be a week away, but it's also five days long, and it will take time for all those gowns to be made"

They both laughed at the sullen expression on my face while continuing to pull me towards the castle tailors.

***

The next few days seemed to almost melt away as everyone in the castle became increasingly excited about the upcoming tourney and High Ball.

Quintaines lined the field from one end to the other, keeping the practice courts full from dawn to dusk with potential applicants.

A large circular area was roped off with stands erected halfway around.

Pavilions in all colors littered the grounds from the castle to the village, with their banners snapping proudly in the wind.

For my part, I spent the hours hiding out in my forest glade, they only place I could find even a modicum of quiet.

Mostly I stayed out there to avoid the burden of getting gowns for the ball.

I thought the one day I'd spent there would be the end of it, but I was sadly mistaken. If anyone caught sight of me I would be dragged off for fitting after fitting.

Like I really cared what I would be wearing, girls dressed up so they could find husbands, and I most definitely was

looking to get married.

I wished I could slow down time, freeze it somehow on the moments when I could just laze around with Mira and Lily, watch the boys practice their jousting, or duel with John, but of course it couldn't last, and all too soon it was the day of the tourney.

***

The sky was clear and promised to be a warm day, good conditions for the matches to come.

Despite the fact that I would only be on the sidelines, I couldn't help but be feel excited for the day's events.

The stands were already filling with court ladies and the men either too old or inexperienced to compete.

All the fiefs were represented, their standards flapping proudly in the gentle breeze.

Many I'd never seen before; a white stag on an brown field, a bronze helm inside a green wreath, and so many more

they looked like rows of glittering jewels planted in the earth.

Farther away across the field I caught sight of the banner for fief Etrian; a red mare rearing against a blue background; meaning that Anna and Charlie would be around here somewhere.

I thought with a pang how I'd left things between us, when she'd been right all along.

And of course, raised higher than all the rest, the Realms golden banner baring the sword plunged partway into the ground against a rising sun.

I worked my way through the milling crowds, weaving in and out of knights frantically arming up.

The tent flaps were closed when I approached, and I carefully pulled one to the side, making sure I wasn't interrupting anything.

John was sitting at the edge of a chair holding his head between his knees. His gaze flickered up once briefly to meet mine before falling back to its original position.

I let the flap drop shut behind me as I made my way tentatively into the makeshift room.

Just as I got near him, he sprung up from his seat, a cheerful expression plastered across his face; obviously for my benefit.

I grimaced to show him I wasn't buying it, and his face immediately fell into a slight frown.

"Nervous?"

He scoffed.

"Of course not" He said before he half turned away from me, busying himself by polishing the shield laying across a little cot with the rest of his armour.

I rolled my eyes at his back, hearing the lie in his words.

"It's okay to be nervous in your first tourney you know."

"I'm not nervous" He insisted "It's just... there's a lot of people out there" He finished with a shrug.

Ah, there it was; the real problem.

"A lot of people to make a bad impression on?" I guessed.

He turned to face me and nodded wearily.

Now that I could see him properly I saw how pale his complexion looked, and the faint bags under his eyes.

"It's not that I expect to win or anything... but suppose I get unseated in the first run?"

"That won't happen. I've seen you practice, you'll do just fine."

He half smiled. "Think so?"

"I know so" I said with a wink.

He laughed and began pulling his chainmail on.

Once he was all armoured up he walked over to a basin of water and splashed his face a few times before turning to me again.

"Wish me luck." An

seemed to be implied.

"That reminds me! I brought you a good luck charm."

He looked momentarily stunned while I pulled out a thin white gold chain. Hanging from it was a ring of mine set with an amber jewel.

I felt suddenly embarrassed at the gesture and handed it to him awkwardly.

His face broke into a smile, the first I'd seen all day, as he took it from my grasp, his fingers brushing lightly against my own.

I felt myself blushing slightly as he put it around his neck and tucked it under his armour.

"Thanks Cece" He said quietly and leaned down, brushing his lips against my cheek. "But you're the only luck I need."

I bit my lip as my face grew hotter and watched as he walked out of the pavilion, the flap falling back into place behind him.

In the quiet left behind him I could hear my heart beating rapidly and stayed inside a few moments longer to compose myself.

When I walked out my eyes sought him out immediately, to find him talking to a group of knights.

Whatever doubt and weariness had shown in his face before was gone now; replaced with a confidence I'd never seen before.

He talked easily, and smiled often, seeming to charm his guests while playing the gracious host.

It was obvious they felt comfortable around him, and not intimidated by his being the Prince.

This was the first I'd seen of him really playing Prince. It made me realize how different he always acted around me and all our friends. Even now though, I couldn't see him as my Prince, he was still just John.

He caught my gaze for a moment and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips while he continued in his conversation.

I shook myself out of my reverie and headed towards the stands so I could find a good seat.

I kept a lookout for Anna, but still couldn't see her anywhere in the milling crowds. It was especially hard to from here since most people had begun to make their way over to the stands.

A waving hand caught my attention and I made my way over to Mira and Lily. The seats filled up around us rapidly, clearing the view before us.

Across from the field a scoreboard was set up, with all the participants and their opponents for the first round.

On either side a few riders were cued up on their horses, while the rest took seats around the scoreboard, away from the main audience.

Sitting at the very top of the stands were the King and Queen, and right at the edge of the field was a panel of three judges. In the case were no contestant lost his seat

after three runs, the judges would chose a winner based on the power of blows and marksmanship.

A trumpet blew in three short bursts signalling that the first match was starting soon. The loud talking changed to a quiet buzz of anticipation as the last people without seats hurried to find some.

The first two riders walked their horses into the arena, while an escort held their banner up high for the audience.

There were scattered cheers from the fiefs the men belonged to. Two heralds met each of the riders while they mounted up and donned their helms. The banners were exchanged for lances while the heralds recited a quick overview of the rules.

Finally, the list was cleared and the first trumpet blared signalling the first run.

On cue, the riders charged towards each other, their lances held steady between them. They both crouched low in their saddles, gaining moments before coming together in a loud crash.

Loud cheers rose up from the crowds as they screamed for their favourites to win.

The second run had the challengers crashing together in an explosion of lances, splinters flying through the air to scatter the ground.

Finally, on the third run, one of the men was unhorsed, and the other declared winner. I cheered along with the rest of the crowd as the matches continued.

Occasionally I saw familiar faces, and cheered all the louder when both David and Luke had their chance in the lists.

David unhorsed his opponent on the second run, while Luke was declared winner for technique when neither he nor his opponent left the saddle.

On several runs Mira and I leaped from our seats to cheer louder when a rider did exceptionally well. Lily winced and covered her eyes whenever a rider flew from his saddle to land with a heavy thump on the ground.

Men took their defeats graciously and took places among the crowd to watch the next match.

It was near mid morning when the hush fell over the audience. I stopped talking abruptly to see what had caused the sudden quiet when my eyes fell on John entering the lists.

Of course, this was the most anticipated of the matches. Many people had never before seen the Prince of the realm. I could understand now why he'd felt so much pressure this morning.

The stands were unnaturally quiet as he rode into the field, as if everyone held their breath. Sir Corry had the honour of holding his banner and stood proudly beside him, either unaware or unbothered by the lack of noise.

A herald rode out to meet them; going through the same motions he had for the other riders.

The field was cleared again and I waited at the edge of my seat for the trumpet to sound.

Finally it did, and silence was replaced with the thundering of hooves pounding down the field.

They came together in a fearsome crash, both lances shattering on impact, to loud cheers from the audience, which had seemed to regain its voice.

The men rode back to their starting lines and were handed fresh lances.

Again, the trumpet blared, and again the riders charged down the field.

I crossed my fingers, and waited anxiously for the impact. I saw John's opponent slap back into his saddle and only barely manage to keep astride.

It all came down to the third run. I watched tensely as both men once again rode to their starting positions.

Another silence enveloped the crowd as the trumpet sounded once more.

Both horses raced down the field, faster than either of the runs before. They collided right in the middle of the field accompanied by another rain of splinters from John's shattered lance.

I thought it would be up to the judges then, but to the surprise of many he didn't veer away from his opponent.

Keeping up his momentum John met his opponent with his shield up. His opponent lifted his shield up only a fraction of a second too late, deciding the match as he flew out of his saddle.

A deafening cheer, louder than all the rest rose from the stands, swelling with intensity like a wave.

Scattered cries of 'Hail the Prince' ripped through the air and were quickly taken up by the audience in a loud chant.

Mira and I had leapt to our feet and hugged each other in our excitement, screaming the chant with all the rest and laughing from relief.

John dismounted and walked over to the fallen knight, offering him a hand up from the ground.

The knight stood up and they shook hands before heading off the field in opposite directions.

I could tell, from the roar of the crowd, that regardless of who won today's tourney, it was this match that would be the most remembered.

Only when the next riders had cued up did the audience finally begin to settle down again.

I kept my eyes on John as he rode up to his friends, receiving praise and slaps on the back. I would have gone down there to congratulate him myself if there was any way for me to get out of the stands.

After a few moments his eyes turned to the stands and immediately met mine.

I smiled at him from across the field and saw him wink in return, putting a hand up to his chest where the chain I'd given him rested.

***

The matches continued well into the afternoon as more and more riders were defeated. David made it through three more matches and was finally unhorsed in his fifth while Luke only made it to the third.

John surprised us all, with one victory after another, and never failed to have the audience jumping to their feet in applause.

After every match he would grin up at me from across the field earning me raised eyebrows and nudges from both Lily and Mira. Fortunately, they were the only ones who seemed to notice.

It wasn't until near the end, when the tourney was winding down to the last four matches, that John was finally beaten. And even then, he didn't lose his seat; only losing from the judges decisions.

He bowed to the audience from his seat and walked out of the field with his head held high to a cheer nearly as loud as from one of his wins.

He still looked for me in the stands, shrugging slightly at his defeat, but his smile wasn't dimmed in the slightest. I knew he was happy for having made it so far.

We were bathed in the light of sunset when Mason Friedan was named Champion of the tourney. He was a young man with armour not nearly as rich as many of those he'd defeated. He'd become a crowd favourite early on, winning his matches gracefully and often quickly.

There was a short ceremony in which he was met by the King and Queen who presented him with a garland for his victory. John stood by his parents and greeted the young knight like an old friend.

As Champion he was allowed to make one request of the King as a reward. When he couldn't think of anything, the King offered him the honour of being squire to the Prince.

He looked overwhelmed at the offer, eyes shining in delight at the idea as he was given the title before the entire court.

After the ceremony everyone made their way to the back of the castle where rows of tables had been set with food and attendants circled around with glasses of wine and sparkling cider.

Musicians had been hired for the entire week and played soft melodies so that the castle guests could talk and mingle.

I was able to lose Mira and Lily quickly in the groups of partiers and walked along the castle wall, trying to duck out early before I was missed.

I had almost escaped when an arm wrapped around my wrist, stopping me from going any further.

With a grimace I pulled my arm free and turned to face a smirking John.

Of course.

Who else would it be?

"Trying to run away are we?"

"I would have succeeded too if you hadn't so rudely stopped me" I grumbled.

He laughed and turned to speak to the man slightly behind him, who I only just noticed standing there.

"You'll have to excuse Cece, social gatherings make her grumpy."

"Only because it's an excuse for palace ladies to stand around and judge me" I said haughtily.

He grinned and pulled his friend to his side so that I could see it was his new squire Mason.

"Mason, I'd like to introduce you to Celia Rhodes, our resident Lady Knight" He said with a half smile.

"Nice to meet you Mason, you were excellent in the lists."

"Thank you. May I ask why you didn't ride?"

"I'm afraid it's not one of my talents."

"And thank goodness for that, we men need to salvage our pride somewhere" John cut in.

The three of us talked for a while, Mason acting more relaxed around the Prince by the minute. I suspected it had something to do with the fact that I didn't treat John anything like a Prince.

Now that I thought of it, that may have even been the reason why John introduced Mason to me before anyone else.

"Well John, if I've humoured you enough, I'd like to make my escape now. I'll need all the time I can get to mentally prepare myself for tomorrow"

Both boys laughed. "Alright, I suppose I can let you go now. I should probably go act like a Prince now and greet all the

high lords and ladies who are no doubt trying to plan my wedding to their daughters as we speak."

His tone was light, but I still caught the undertone of worry in his voice. It had brought uncomfortable feelings to me as well, but I tried my best not to let them show.

"Until tomorrow then Celia" Mason said with a quick smile.

"Unfortunately" I muttered with a frown.

"'Night Cece, try not to rip up your gowns in the night."

"Would that get me out of attending?" I asked hopefully.

"Not likely. I'm sure you're friends have extras hidden away, and my mother would be happy to lend you her old ones" He said with a smirk.

I walked away grumbling under my breath about that ball. Whatever else might happen over the next five days of the ball, one thing was certain.

John would

let me live down wearing all those dresses.

The Last Dance (30)

Thank you all for being so patient for this chapter, there were so many times I was going to cut it off and then just kept on going. Not all the nights of the ball will be this long, but since this was the first I had to start it off awesome. I was so excited, I even made my own picture montage for the chapter which is on the side =)

The dress is a little more modern than I would have liked, I was hoping for something more vintage to match the olden days with a modern twist time period but didn't have much luck, so modern it is.

Comment and Vote?

Go back and vote?

Cheers,

xo.

And now, enjoy the long awaited ball!!

****

Recap:

_____

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"Unfortunately" I muttered with a frown.

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I walked away grumbling under my breath about that ball. Whatever else might happen over the next five days of the ball, one thing was certain.

John would NEVER let me live down wearing all those dresses.

Chapter 30 - The Mask

{The High Ball, Day 1}

Celia's POV

I stubbornly covered my ears, trying to drown out the constant knocking that had plagued my door all morning.

I know it was silly and childish but I found myself unable to face whatever might wait outside those doors.

The day was finally here, the first night of the ball. It was really happening.

It had been years since I'd gone to the High Ball, and I dreaded going now. Images of me tripping over a gown, falling down the stairs, or embarrassing myself in front of everyone kept playing over and over in my hear in a constant loop.

I winced every time, it seemed too real.

Lily and Mira had been outside my door several times already, trying to coax me out, but I couldn't answer the door even if I wanted to. I felt paralyzed in place, under the false belief that if I just remained here long enough it would all go away.

Already I could imagine the cold stares and sneering mouths of the court ladies, judging me for all I was. I couldn't imagine myself to be anything compared to their daughters of nobility, trained to be proper ladies from birth.

What would they regard me as? Some barbaric knight-to-be who didn't belong in their world, most like. A caged animal they all mocked and jeered at.

I could hear the sounds in my mind, as if they were already happening; the sound of fabric ripping as I lost my balance somewhere, the quiet snickering behind upraised hands, the pitying tsks and sniffles of contempt.

I knew I was overreacting, blowing everything out of proportion, but I couldn't stop the vivid sensations from trapping me in their snares. I felt helpless, and out of place. Never before had I questioned my choices to be a knight.

Never, until now.

I was gripped with an irrational fear that had me hiding under the covers of my bed, shielding myself from the dreams that I felt sure would unfold the second I-

"Celia?"

My name, whispered through the door with such familiar grace broke me out of my pitiful nightmares.

"Anna?"

"I have a key, may I come in?" Her muffled voice rang clearly in my mind and I felt myself nodding vigorously before realizing she couldn't see my actions.

"Yes."

I clutched the blanket closer to myself as the door inched open. She came into the room without making a sound, her back facing me while she closed the door and locked it behind her.

We were both bathed in darkness with only the fainted rays of light seeping through the cracks in my drawn shutters.

The shadow that outlined her body moved along the wall towards the window. With one motion she threw open the shutters and I immediately covered my eyes against the sudden harsh light.

I blinked rapidly to readjust while she looked around the room with a frown.

I knew how it must look.

My usually tidy room was a mess of scattered clothes, shoes, books and trinkets that had been dislodged from counters and shelves, all a result from my restless night.

I remembered pulling every piece of clothing from my closet, looking for even a shred of femininity. I remembered finding the skirts Lady Maria had given me and trying them on in desperation to look like a girl, but only seeing myself look silly and out of place.

I remembered tossing and turning for hours as my sheets got more and more tangled around me and how often I

jumped out of bed, too anxious to lie under the covers for another second.

I remembered pulling out a practice sword and swinging it around in the dark, knocking things off the dresser in the close confines.

I remembered pulling book after book off the shelf in the hopes of finding comfort, just to toss them aside a page later and fumbling clumsily around in the dark for anything that might be a distraction.

I buried my face in my knees, feeling ashamed and pathetic as I heard Anna picking her way through the mess and making her way towards me. I felt her weight on the edge of my bed before being pulled into her arms.

All at once I remembered the many nights of my childhood, when she would hold me this exact same way every time John upset me. It was already making me feel calmer, but at the same time more upset because of the way I'd left things with her last time.

"Anna, I'm so sorry."

"Whatever for Cee?"

"For... when I came to visit" I mumbled quietly.

She laughed softly, the sound bringing another instant feeling of comfort.

"I'm your older sister Cee, there's nothing you could do that needs apologizing for."

"Do I have to go tonight? Or any night? Can't I just stay in here?"

"And do what? Hide? That's not the Celia I know."

"The Celia you know doesn't belong in a dress, much less at a ball" I said bitterly.

"Wrong. The Cee I know belongs anywhere she wants to, and does it better than anyone else to boot. How many people said you didn't belong on the training fields with the boys? How many times did they tell you to put down your sword? Trade your breeches for a skirt? Ride side saddle on a horse? They never stopped you before so why now? This is your chance to prove them all wrong. Show them all you can be a knight

a lady. It doesn't have to be one or the other Cee."

"What if they laugh?"

"They wouldn't dare" She said firmly. "And especially not after I'm done with you" I pulled away from her to see an amused expression on her face.

"I brought you something."

Getting up from the bed, she moved over to the door where a large box had been set down on the dresser. I guess I hadn't noticed it when she'd first walked in.

"I know the Queen already got you a dress for tomorrow when you'll be presented, but maybe you'd like to wear this one today?"

She eased off the lid of the box and I found myself leaning forward, excited despite myself.

With a flourish she pulled the dress out of the box and let it cascade down to the floor. I felt my jaw drop open in shock.

It was a beautiful grey satin gown the exact color of my eyes, and so soft looking I just wanted to reach out and run my hands over it.

The top half was elegantly cut and looked like it would fit me perfectly. A border along the top and the shoulder straps were covered in silver and black glass beads. Just below the waist on one side sat a jewelled brooch where everything cinched together before giving way to a full skirt that fell gracefully to the floor.

"It's beautiful Anna"

I felt a familiar buzzing of excitement, one I hadn't felt in a long time. I remembered the day of the ball eight years ago, when I stood in Anna's room, twirling around in skirts that were far too long and bursting with excitement to go to the ball for the first time.

A dress that beautiful could make anyone look like a lady, maybe even me.

The rest of the day was spent in my room. Anna and I walked around cleaning the floor and pushing everything against the wall until a large space was cleared in the middle of the room. She left only once to go get her dress and supplies, and came back with Mira and Lily in tow, all laden down with armfuls of stuff.

My room was transformed into part fitting room, part hair dresser, and part judging panel as we took turns trying on different things. The door stayed locked and it turned into something of a girl's day in.

Slowly I felt myself relaxing while we all fussed around getting ready. For the most part I tried to stay out of the way, until I was forced into a chair or to try on a pair of

shoes. It was the most time I'd ever spent getting ready for anything.

Anna worked on my hair, using hot irons to curl it into springy ringlet's that bounced whenever I moved. At first it looked funny to me, but she pulled most of it back into a pale silver net, leaving only a thick strand to drape over my left shoulder, falling just above my chest. Smaller curls were left lose to frame my face and the whole effect looked pretty and elegant.

She helped Mira and Lily with their hair as well and we all pitched in to help her with hers. It was somewhat of a crash course for me; all three of them explaining everything they were doing and making me try it out on one of them. The makeup was the hardest to apply, but after a few tries I was starting to get the hang of it.

Finally, it was eight o'clock, time for the ball to start. I pictured all the girls who would be presented today lining up behind the doors to the marble staircase and was grateful I had another day to prepare.

From outside my room I could hear the laughter and quick footsteps of girls making their way towards the ballroom. For this week, it didn't matter what their station in life might be, they would all get a chance at the top of those stairs.

"Ready to go Cee?" Anna asked finally.

Like always, she managed to look beautiful, in a rich brown dress that made her pale skin seem to glow. I snuck a glance towards the direction of the mirror, though I hadn't had the guts to look into it for the last few hours.

"You all go on ahead, I'll catch up" I said as bravely as I could.

She regarded me for only a moment more, and I nodded to show that I really would follow soon, before they let the door shut behind them with a final sounding click.

I stood where I was until the noise from the hallway quieted down, and finally died away.

Finding comfort in being alone, I slowly made my way over to the mirror, keeping my eyes closed until I was standing directly in front of it.

Now or never.

I opened my eyes.

It took me a moment to recognize the girl in the mirror. It was the eyes that finally convinced me, they looked scared. But the rest was so different I could almost be someone else. Someone who might actually belong in there.

A Lady.

Lady Celia, no Lady Knight Celia.

The thought brought a smile to my lips, lighting up the foreign face before me. Maybe it wasn't as different as I saw, but to me it was a whole other person entirely.

It made an odd kind of sense. This day, the day I'd been thinking of, dreading, and slightly excited about hardly seemed real, so why not play a charade?

I nudged the door open only wide enough to stick my head out and look both ways down the hall.

Empty.

With one last regretful look back at my bed I shut the door behind me and took a deep breath.

This was it.

Now or never.

I walked down the corridors, all silent but for the faint click-clack of my shoes against the floor. The noise gradually increased the closer I got to the doors on the main level. There was the sound of laughter and faint chattering, the clinking of glasses and rustle of skirts.

I stood uncertainly outside the doors, wondering how to enter unnoticed, when my eyes fell on a basket propped on a table to my right.

Curiously I walked over and looked inside, feeling another smile tugging up the corners of my lips.

The basket was filled with dozens of delicate masks in all colors and fabrics. Of course, I'd almost forgotten the tradition for married women to wear masks.

It was almost too perfect for words.

With another quick glance around me I dropped my fingers into the basket and came out with a lacy black mask. It was a simple thing, without much ornament except for a simple beaded flower on the left with a few strands of black and grey beads hanging down, and a beaded border around the edge and top of the eyes. I slid it over my head, being careful not to disturb the curls and net my sister had worked so hard to place.

I slipped around to another set of doors, one that came out just to the right of the grand staircase, and right in the

shadows.

Perfect.

All my days of coming to the ball room in preparation for this week were finally paying off.

With a last deep breath I opened the door and stepped inside.

I took a moment to stand in place and gape around at my surroundings. It almost hurt the eyes to look at, it was so overwhelming. Everywhere you turned were glittering gowns in every color of the rainbow and every shade imaginable.

Jewellery sparkled from hair ornaments, ears and around necks, ranging from expensive and gaudy to simple and elegant. I reached a hand up to my own bare neck, where I'd refused to wear anything extra and only felt a pang that this might make me stand out more.

It hardly matter though since I wore a mask, and was in my own way, invisible. The lighting was dimmed to give a romantic atmosphere and soft music filtered around the dance floor from the stage set near the throne dais.

I kept to the shadows, moving around as though I was one myself, listening, watching, enjoying from a distance. There were a few names still being called, a few girls still bravely making their decent into the ranks of adulthood.

I noted with relief that not all attendants watched the stairs, some had already taken to the dance floor, or were deep in conversation with other guests. It removed some of the pressure knowing I wouldn't be center stage when it was my turn at the top.

I looked to the dais where the King and Queen sat, regal as any monarchs should be. The King was a brilliant sight, all in deep red and gold with a gracious smile on his face as he spoke with another gentleman. A gold crown with a single ruby set on the highest point rested on his chocolate brown hair, one of the very few times I'd seen him wearing one.

The Queen sat on the same level beside him in a midnight blue and silver gown with a silver crown shaped like woven leaves resting on her hair. Together they looked like fire and ice; the perfect pair.

I looked for John next, but the throne that should have been his was empty. My eyes roamed the dance floor and surrounding crowds, but still couldn't find him. I eventually looked to the edges of the room and there I finally saw him, standing near the stairs.

He was wearing a black tunic that fell just below his waist and was edged in gold around the bottom and sleeves over a pair of black breeches. Gold laces criss-crossed down his arms and a gold belt with a large buckle circled his waist, with an ornate sword hanging from it; more decoration than anything else.

The front of his tunic had the realms coat of arms on it, and a black cape with a gold underside hung from his shoulders. On his head rested a modest gold crown that barely showed against his molten gold hair, but still singled him out for every young woman to see.

It was only then, after marvelling at his Princely appearance that suited him so well, that I took in the rest of him and noticed the sullen and bored expression on his face. A group of girls chattered on at him, completely unaware that he wasn't paying them the slightest attention.

I couldn't help but laugh at his obvious discomfort. I pitied him, but not enough to go over there to rescue him and blow my cover. He was a big boy, he could handle himself.

I had a feeling even if he weren't Prince he would earn the same looks of admiration from those girls. His dishevelled hair and pouted lips only made him look more attractive, the poor fool.

Shaking my head at his misfortune, I looked around once more, my eyes falling on the doors that led outside to the private courtyard with the cherry blossom tree.

I stared at it in longing, but knew I had to be seen by at least a few people or they would think I hadn't come.

Reluctantly I made my way over to where the King now stood alone, staring out over the ball. I kept to the shadows the whole way and only took off my mask at the last moment possible, hiding it behind my back as I stepped out to greet him.

I curtsied; taking advantage of the one time I was wearing a dress to do so. "Uncle Jeoffrey" I stood up to see him beaming at me.

"Why Celia, I hardly believe my eyes, look at you."

"It's quite a change I admit" I said sheepishly.

He raised an eyebrow and smiled. "It certainly is, and one you should consider more often. You look stunning my dear; I hope my son's learned his manners this time and told you the same."

I felt myself blushing and was grateful John was being held up across the room.

"I've yet to run into him Uncle."

"Now that's surprising, he seems to have taken to following you around the castle like a lost puppy since your return."

I tried holding back a laugh but only lasted for a moment. "I hadn't noticed."

He complimented me once more before walking back into the crowd to talk to other guests while I slipped back into the shadows, donning my mask once again.

I repeated the process with my parents and Anna, so she would know I actually showed up, before tracing my shadowed path to the doors that led outside.

Alone at last.

I could only handle so much revelry for one night. I took one last look inside, trying to spot Luke and David, even John's new squire Mason, but none were inside. Knowing those boys they were probably off in a corner somewhere talking to girls.

The sun was starting to set, bathing everything in a glow of pink and orange light. I walked down the path that had once been my stage, almost hearing the laughter of the young girl so full of innocence and love I'd once been.

I walked up to the old cherry blossom tree, already bursting with blooms, while the petals that had been loosened in the breeze dusted the bench and ground all around it.

I took a few steps past the tree and walked up to the trellis that surrounded this courtyard. I couldn't help but remember that this year's ball wasn't just a big deal for

me... by the end of the fifth night John would have to pick a Queen.

I could easily see him up there, on that dais where his father now sat; John was born to be King, even if he couldn't see it yet.

But as for the Queen... that could never be me. Perhaps I could manage myself in a dress now, even look like a proper Lady, but there was so much more to it than that.

I could never act the part, command that kind of presence. I hated being the center of attention, even when it was something I was confident in, like fighting.

And being Queen meant people looked up to you, something that could never be true of me, not the upstart lady knight who didn't know her place.

Never me.

John's POV

I quickly ducked behind a server, grabbing his sleeve in a silent beg to stay where he was. He seemed to understand well enough, only chuckling a little as he offered his tray to those in front of him and keeping me out of view.

I looked under his arm to see the girl that had been following me looking around in confusion.

Please let her go away.

She looked to her left and right, spinning around in a circle as if I were just behind her. Her eyes traveled to the server and I prayed she didn't suddenly desire a drink.

For a second she seemed to be looking right at me, but then the moment passed and she stomped off in the opposite direction.

I let out a deep sigh of relief.

"All clear My Prince?" The server asked with a slight smile.

"For now at least; thank you."

He nodded good-naturedly and walked off to continue his rounds. It was no surprise that he took my behaviour so calmly; I'd been doing this for years.

It was complete madness, the same every year. If it wasn't a girl practically begging for my attention, it was her mother, hinting quite obviously that her daughter would make a lovely bride.

I suppose I was at least lucky that it was traditionally men who asked women to dance or I'd never get away. Where was Mason when I needed him?

What good was a squire if he was off charming the court ladies along with my other friends?

If only I could find Celia. Then I could keep her by my side the whole night to discourage the others.

Then again, I'm sure she would just go out of her way to make me talk to the other girls. No doubt she was standing off to the side somewhere laughing at me.

I flattened myself against the staircase, just barely avoiding a young girl with her mother.

Mothers really were the worst of them. The girls I could handle; at least with them I just had to nod a few times and smile.

Mothers though, they were tricky. They all seemed to have an innate ability to interpret anything I said as interest in their daughter.

I looked around and saw an open door, which I was fairly certain led outside. Unfortunately, it involved walking past the edge of the dance floor.

I put my head down and started walking briskly across the room, not making eye contact with anyone. I breathed a huge sigh of relief just as I made it to the doors.

"My Prince! Such an honour!"

Drat.

Spotted.

I straightened up and quickly plastered a smile to my face.

"Lady Helena, the honour is all mine."

"The Ballroom looks simple marvellous this year. Your father has certainly outdone himself."

"He'll be pleased you like it."

"Oh I do, but not nearly so much as my daughter, she's being presented tomorrow you know."

Of course, right on queue.

"Is that so? She must be quite excited."

"Indeed, she hopes to be swept off her feet by her Prince Charming" She said with a wink.

It amazed me that these conversations never deviated from their script.

"Don't they all?" I said pleasantly, adding a wide smile.

Her own smile faltered for a moment; obviously she'd been expecting a different response.

I mean really what did she expect? That I would propose to her daughter on the spot?

But of course, that was

what she was expecting.

"I suppose... but between you and me she's a great deal prettier than all the rest."

As if I hadn't heard that one before.

Surely not every girl here could be the epitome of female beauty, though I suppose their mothers couldn't tell the truth.

"I hear the manor at Fief Daera has been redone."

"It has your Highness, my daughter would take it as the highest compliment if you were to visit us."

So much for my attempt to change the subject, match-making mothers could never be deterred.

"My Petunia really is quite excited to get married. I'm sure you share her sentiments being twenty-one now, a man grown and ready to settle down."

I felt an uncomfortable lump form in the pit of my stomach.

"Well... I haven't really thought about it."

If only that were true; I hadn't stopped thinking about it since we got back to the castle.

She winked at me again. "Perhaps you just haven't met the right woman yet."

Or perhaps I have and she's already turned me down.

Maybe not in those words, but it was a rejection all the same. I wasn't sure my pride could handle another refusal.

Suddenly I felt the need for some air.

Lady Helena was still busy prattling on about her daughters many virtues. I didn't feel bad for interrupting her knowing that if I didn't she could very well go on all night.

"If you'll excuse me my Lady, I've neglected my other guests."

"Of course your Highness, perhaps we'll have the pleasure of speaking again another night."

Not if I can help it.

She curtsied once before walking away.

Well, at least she knew a dismissal when she heard one, which was more than I could say for others.

As soon as she had her back turned, I slipped outside unnoticed, closing the door behind me.

I felt my shoulders sag immediately in relief before looking around me. The place was unfamiliar to me.

How was it that so many places in my own home were a mystery to me? That clearing of Celia's in the wood, the secret exit in the hedge maze, and now this courtyard?

Apparently it was no secret, since small lights were strung up in all the trees and flower pots, with small lanterns set at intervals along the path. The best part of it though, was that it was empty.

I walked down, putting distance between myself and the door. It would be just my luck to be caught in here with another mother and no easy way to get out.

At the end of the path was a large cherry blossom tree; the only one without lights, though it seemed to emit a glow of its own.

I started walking towards it, noticing too late the figure sitting on the bench under it.

I hesitated, debating whether or not to go back since I hadn't been seen yet. Still I would rather risk one person than the many that waited for me inside.

I continued walking, and though plenty of noise announced my presence the figure, who I could now make out as a woman, she didn't turn around.

Not wanting to be rude I waited at the opposite end of the bench and cleared my throat.

The woman turned her head towards me, but the sun, now low in the sky, prevented me from making out any of her features.

I did notice the mask on her face, and for a moment worried I faced another match-making mother, but a moment later I realized she was too young for that, a new bride at the most, so I was safe.

"I'm sorry to disturb you my Lady."

"You should be, I was enjoying the peace and quiet until now."

I was momentarily stunned that someone would actually speak to me that way, until the familiar voice registered in my mind.

"Cece?"

I stepped to the side so the sun wouldn't block my view and stared in disbelief at the girl, no woman, sitting before me.

That could not be Celia.

And yet, her lips pulled up into the playful grin I'd recognize anywhere while her hands lifted up to remove the mask around her face.

"Actually, I think I like the sound of 'my Lady'" She teased.

She stood up then, a look of annoyance passing across her face, but I was too preoccupied to care.

I could feel my jaw hanging open in shock but couldn't even be bothered to close it.

I always knew she was beautiful, but I never knew she could look like that. The dress followed every curve of her body, showing off her slender figure.

To think I used to make fun of her for not being able to fill out a dress. What a fool I'd been not to notice her turn into this.

She started walking towards me, drawing my eyes down to her hips moving beneath the dress.

I could feel my face flushing a deeper red with every step but still couldn't look away. It was taking every ounce of willpower I had not to pull her close and feel her body against mine.

She raised two fingers and put them under my chin, forcing my gaze up to meet her own. I hardly minded, since that sight left me just as speechless.

"Stop drooling John, it isn't very Princely."

Without thinking I raised my hand to my jaw, before noticing the smirk on her face.

I felt myself smiling back despite her making fun of me and reached my hand out to the curls of hair that lay over her shoulder.

I ran my fingers through them, purposely brushing them along the bare skin and savouring the fiery heat that seemed to jump between her skin and mine before reluctantly pulling away.

"I won't be the last."

She scoffed at me, like it was the most ridiculous thing in the world that someone else might think her beautiful.

If only she knew.

I'd probably have to beat the other boys away with a stick if we went inside.

Still, despite the emphatic shaking of her head, she looked pleased with the implied compliment. Even if she didn't quite believe me, she would see for herself soon enough over the next few nights.

"So what were you doing out here all alone anyway?"

"Just thinking, but mostly hiding."

I laughed. "I'd drag you back inside if I weren't doing the same thing myself."

"You're in luck; this is a good hiding place."

"Is that so?"

She shrugged before sitting down again. "No one found me here last time."

I sat down next to her, leaving a little space between us so as not to push my luck. "What, you mean all those years ago? What were you hiding from then?"

She raised her eyebrows at me, and all at once I knew the answer, even before her words confirmed it.

"You."

She didn't look upset at the memory, but that didn't stop me from feeling instantly guilty.

It had been one thing for me to tease her all these years about wanting to be a knight, and another to make a little girl feel bad about the way she looked.

It only hit me now, eight years later, that I was the reason she gave up wearing dresses and skirts and didn't want to be a Lady. Because of what I'd said to make her feel insecure and doubt how pretty she really was, even until now.

No wonder she had always hated me.

I hated myself.

I turned my head to look at her. She was staring off into the distance, not really looking at anything since it was too dark to see very far.

"Cece?"

"Hmm?" She turned back to me blinking slowly, as if coming out of a dream.

"I'm sorry I ever made you feel like you weren't girly enough."

She looked surprised for a moment before shaking her head at me. "I didn't blame you for that John."

"You didn't have to. It's my fault you're out here hiding instead of in there dancing with someone who's actually worth your while."

"It's not your fault, why would you even think that?"

"Because I always laughed at you and made fun of you. You're too nice to say it out loud but you know it's true--"

I was cut off by her bursting out into laughter.

"John... where... is this even... coming from?" She asked between laughs.

I didn't get what was so funny about this but continued anyway. "--you probably thought I would give you a hard time tonight too. Was it me you were hiding from?" I finished in a whisper.

She stopped laughing abruptly and looked at me incredulously.

"You're serious aren't you?"

When I didn't say anything she pursed her lips and draped her hand over mine on the bench. The unexpected contact sent sparks through me, but I forced myself to listen to what she was saying.

"John, you're the only one I wasn't hiding from. And yes, maybe I did think you would give me a hard time, but only as a joke. And what's this about being too nice to blame you out loud? When would I ever pass up the chance to call you an idiot to your face-which by the way you

if you think all that. And even supposing you never laughed or made fun of me as a kid, do you really think I would have wanted to be a Lady? What little girl doesn't like to dress up every now and then? I would have grown tired of it even without your help. You just sped up the process a little."

"Then why did you hate me for it?"

"Because you were so condescending and arrogant."

Ouch, that was blunt. But then again what was I expecting? That she would deny hating me?

That would be a lie.

"Don't soften the blow there Cece" I said sarcastically.

"I wouldn't think of it."

She smiled once more, before looking off into the dark again.

"What are you thinking about?" I blurted out before thinking better of it.

She looked away from me, but not before I caught the sadness in her face.

"This was where Anna told me she was leaving. Every time I come here I can't help but think about it."

Her voice sounded far away, as if she was replaying the memory in her mind as we spoke.

I hated seeing her sad and wondered what I could do to cheer her up. I smiled slightly as an idea came to mind.

"Well, I'll just have to give you something else to think about."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering I grabbed her hand, ignoring the sparks that flew up once again and pulled her along behind me towards the door.

Her pace slowed down in reluctance just as a series of bells started to chime from inside. I hadn't realized we'd spent so much time out here.

"What was that?"

I let go of her hand for a moment to open the door just enough for the music to filter outside.

"It's to signal the last dance of the night; may I have the honour my Lady?" I said while sweeping her a low bow.

She was trying not to laugh when I stood up, but a faint blush coloured her cheeks when she took my hand; at least I hadn't lost all my charm.

"I don't know John; it didn't end very well last time" She joked.

"That's because last time you didn't trust me."

"And you think I do now?"

I placed my hand on her waist and pulled her close to me, much closer than the dance required or was even proper, but I didn't care. It's not like anyone was around to see anyway.

"Yes" I whispered softly in her ear.

I laughed when she muttered something about me being 'full of it' that I probably wasn't supposed to hear, but so long as she wasn't pulling away she could say all she wanted about me.

I closed my eyes, all too aware of every place our bodies touched. It was like all my senses were in sharp focus. She started humming along to the music playing inside, and it was the only sound I could hear.

All the unpleasantness from the beginning of the evening, and my guilt from before were forgotten.

All the stress and worry about getting married didn't matter.

Right now I wasn't Prince Johnathan, or John, or even the thirteen year old boy who was condescending and arrogant.

Right now I was just the luckiest man in the world, dancing with the girl I was completely in love with.

The thought brought me to a sudden stop, just as another round of bells signalled the end of the first night of the ball.

I loved her.

The Last Dance (31)

Just a quick note, the original gown Celia was supposed to be presented in (from the King and Queen) was green, but I changed it to gold.

Also, special thanks to Nightlylioness for the song, I've always loved that movie and especially the song and I'm so glad your message reminded me of it =)

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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Chapter 31 - Golden Girl

{The High Ball, Day 2}

Celia's POV

I took one last look in the mirror, and it seemed too good to be true that I could be satisfied by my appearance for the second time. I loved the way the pale gold dress caught the light and shimmered every time I moved. It looked even prettier than it had two months ago when the King and Queen had given it to me.

Finally I left the comfort of my room and headed down the deserted hallway. This time though it was not for being late. I had received the note this morning, a summons to be at the ballroom one hour before the ball. Everyone not being

presented remained in their rooms, though the excitement and laughter filtered out to ring down the halls like a procession.

Soon I wasn't the only one walking as girls timidly inched open their doors to enter the hall. Each held a cream coloured piece of parchment with curly red writing just visible between their clenched fingers.

The sight made me loosen the tight grip I had on mine for fear that the heat of my fingers might cause the ink to run.

Most floated down the hallway as if in a dream, and for many of them it probably was. I was glad to see mine wasn't the only face pale with worry.

At least I fit in, I thought dully, at least I looked the part, though from glances I kept getting I knew I still stood out. The question was whether it was in a bad way or good.

The few girls before me turned a corner and held their skirts up to climb a set of stairs I had never used before. I knew where it led though, and followed the bodies that swirled around me in a near daze.

I was grateful to have people to follow since I wasn't paying the slightest attention to where I was going. My mind was elsewhere, on another set of stairs that I had never walked before.

Unconsciously my steps slowed down, as if in anticipation of the ordeal to come and I bumped into another girl behind me.

I jerked out of my trance and turned around to apologize, only to be looked over in contempt and pushed roughly past by a girl in a dark orange dress.

Judging.

They were always judging.

The stairs opened out into a wide room bathed in bright candlelight. Most girls were crowed here now while yet more arrived, each with the telltale cream card.

At the end of the room towered the ornate double doors that opened to the ballroom.

A mounting sense of dread mixed unpleasantly with an eruption of butterflies from my lower stomach.

Standing before the doors was an older woman with a sour look on her face trying to establish some kind of order. Around the room castle attendants begged for quiet and finally the loud din fell to a quiet hush of anticipation.

The sour woman at the front began to talk, her words sharp, and commanding a rapt attention from the women around me. The words hardly seemed to register in my fear clouded mind, though I struggled to pay attention.

All at once the crowd surged forward, and I found myself pushed to the front just as the oak doors were pushed outward.

My eyes stayed trained on the older woman as she strode forward and demonstrated the descent for all of us to see.

It seemed slightly ridiculous to me that we should be taught how to walk down a flight of stairs, and yet I was grateful for the show all the same.

It would be easy in the moment to forget just how to place one foot in front of the other. Something I felt sure only I

would manage to do.

The woman descended gracefully, one hand placed lightly on the banister to her right. It was a relief that I would have that support at least, though I would more likely be clenching the railing for dear life rather than the feather light touch she placed upon it.

She reached the bottom quickly and came back up from the other side to stand before us once more. Another set of commands were shouted out before she stood once again before the stairs.

I realized that a line was beginning to form and meekly stood off to the side letting the most anxious take places at the front. I watched as the woman began gliding down once more, this time with a line of girls' following one step behind the other.

Not wanting to be at the end I placed myself somewhere in the middle, though still nearer the back. The line moved steadily following the mistress down one side and up the other.

I moved my cream place card to my left hand as the rail came into view and grasped it tightly, finding reassurance in the solid marble under my fingers.

I felt my eyes focus on the hem of the girl before me, taking each step only when she did, not even noticing when we reached the bottom and only vaguely aware that we were climbing up once more.

Only then did I finally look up and see that the mistress had disappeared back into the room, the line still intact and trailing ahead of me.

As we walked back into the room I saw that the line looped back and forth from the door to the back of the room, with the mistress and her attendants walking between us to keep everyone in place.

Apparently this would be the order of our presentation and I was glad I had chosen a spot nearer to the back.

When the last girl had walked back into the room the doors were shut once again, allowing me a sigh of relief.

Everyone stood in silence as the sounds from below started drifting up to where we were. I knew without hearing the bells that the second night of the ball had started.

***

The woman walked to the front of the doors again, motioning for us to be silent though no one had dared utter a sound.

The candelabras around us were doused of light until only a few wall sconces burned in the sudden dark. I wondered for a moment why we were suddenly denied light when the double doors creaked open once again and I realized its purpose.

The room was designed in such a way that we could see into the hall without being seen ourselves, but only when we got close enough in line.

From where I stood I could only make out a few girls in front of me and the top of the ballroom, though none of the people, and was glad I couldn't; it would only scare me faster if I did.

I watched as the first girl came out of the shadows and into the soft lighting of the ballroom. With sure steps she handed her cream place card to a herald who called out her name to the waiting room.

There was quiet talking below as she began walking down before disappearing out of sight. The sound of polite applause signalled her reaching the bottom and another girl was urged forward by the mistress still standing in the shadows.

The pattern followed as each girl was called forward and joined the ranks of adulthood. Harps and violins played soft music, and would for the remainder of the names yet to come, but the sounds of the ball could still be heard above it.

There was always the sound of chatter from those below as girl upon girl came forward. Some cheers were louder than others if a lady was better known, or perhaps more beautiful; I had no way of knowing.

In no time at all it seemed I was near the doors myself, with only a few other girls before me.

Rather than let my eyes be drawn back to the grand staircase I looked out over the ballroom.

Everyone looked much smaller from up here, making the stairs seem that much higher from my perspective.

The chandeliers that hung from the ceiling had hundreds of shards of glass tinted a pale bronze color. As the candles flicked in their holders, light twinkled around the room in soft browns and gold's. Drapes and streamers hung around the walls in deep red and rich brown to make the whole room seem inviting and sultry.

I noticed with some alarm that I was next in line and took a deep breath trying in vain to calm my nerves.

Still hidden in the shadows I pinched my cheeks, trying to put some color in so I wouldn't look so pale with fright in front of everyone.

I heard the sound of applause below and felt a hand on the small of my back pushing me gently forward.

I took one wobbly step and then another until the ballroom opened out below me. I swallowed hard and willed myself to take another step forward to bring me in line with the herald.

With shaking fingers I handed him the card, trying to block out the hundreds of faces staring up at me.

Judging.

Always judging, I thought again.

I saw his lips move but was deaf to the sound since my ears roared with the sound of rushing blood that made me feel momentarily dizzy.

It didn't matter that I couldn't hear it though, since I knew what he said, the words in red ink that stained that cream parchment.

'Lady Celia Aredia Rhodes, daughter of Sir Dimitri and Lady Gizelle of Chalot'.

I took a last step forward, bringing me to the edge of the stairs, but that was all I could manage before being frozen in fear.

There were too many people watching, far too many people.

My heartbeat pumped up to an alarming rate, and another rush of my blood to my head had me grasping the banister in a vice like grip.

There was no mask for me to hide behind today, nor even a lady to walk down in front of me to focus on.

I was all on my own up here.

It was a small mercy that my feet didn't waver or I would surely have fallen. People kept staring, unaware that anything had gone amiss, too far away to notice how white my knuckles were.

Hardly anyone seemed to be talking down there anymore; some had even stopped dancing to watch.

Don't, go back to dancing I begged in my mind.

I had to move, what was I supposed to do now?

One foot in front of the other, I remembered.

I could do that, I could. It was simple. I'd just done it.

I lifted one foot off the ground and placed it on the step below me. So far so good; the first was the hardest.

My eyes searched the room, catching on a woman in a red dress; Anna.

Even from afar I could see her smiling reassuringly, and took another step down.

My grip on the banister loosened considerably as I focused on just her.

For a moment I forgot the others watching and judging and only looked back at her, the steps melting away before me as I slowly made my way down.

I was halfway when I found the courage to look away, searching for another face.

The King and Queen had matching smiles of pride, but the third seat beside them was empty. I looked at the crowd assembled before me, the few couples on the dance floor that had stopped to watch, even the edges of the room, but I couldn't find him anywhere.

The crown and royal seal shouldn't have been hard to see, yet still they eluded me.

I felt a rush of disappointment wash over me.

I refused to believe he wasn't here though.

He had to be.

Somewhere just out of sight maybe, but he had to be here. He would never miss this, if only to make some quip that I hadn't tripped over my gown.

The thought brought a smile to my face, which was probably why I didn't notice that I was on the last step.

I brought my foot down, expecting another step, and instead met only air since the floor was much lower than another step would have been. I felt off balance and stumbled forward slightly, only to be caught by the elbow and steadied.

I could feel my face flushing but no one else seemed to notice the fall as a loud sound of applause filled the air.

I could tell, from the sparks that raced up and down my arms, who my hero was, but it didn't stop me from blushing even brighter when I saw the smirk on his face.

He still held my elbow and tugged me into the shadows and towards the wall by the stairs.

I was too surprised to object, surprised that he'd been right there at the bottom of the stairs, the last place I'd ever expected him to be.

With our backs against the wall he turned to me again, the smirk still in place.

"Don't even say it" I snapped quietly.

His eyes widened in innocence as he tried to hide the smile that couldn't be kept off his face.

"But this is such a perfect 'I told you so' moment" He whined playfully.

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching us before punching him in the side.

Faster than I thought him capable of he pinned my hand in place and forced my hand open to lace his fingers through mine.

Another blush crept up my skin while I looked fretfully around the room for anyone who might be looking here, not missing his smug look.

I tried tugging my hand out of his grasp but he refused to let go, only stepping closer so it couldn't be seen.

"Don't be embarrassed, you once said some... poor fool would catch you at the bottom, and there I was."

He grinned at me, a silly smile that caught me off guard and was completely adorable. I couldn't help but smile back even though I was supposed to be annoyed at him.

Something about what he'd said tugged at my memory.

I distinctly remember it being

who said some poor fool would have to catch me... right after I'd said my true love would be waiting at the bottom.

Did he remember that part too?

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye while he continued to watch the girls being presented. Something about his smile made me think he did remember that significant detail of our old conversation.

The thought worried me. He couldn't afford to feel that way about me; I couldn't afford to feel that way about

. He was going to pick a wife at the end of this ball.

My grip slackened in his hand only slightly, but he still noticed, and let go immediately, as if anticipating my objection. Just that made me feel colder and I crossed my hands over my chest trying to replicate the warmth.

I turned to look at the stairs as the last girl was descending; the one in dark orange who'd pushed passed me earlier. Her arrogance was evident even from this distance as she walked down with her nose in the air and looked down on everyone in contempt.

As she reached the bottom the customary applause broke out, but was drowned out after just a moment with the swelling music that invited everyone to the dance floor.

The girl in orange shot a look at the corner where the musicians stood, glaring in silent accusation for ruining her moment of glory.

The crowd around us thinned slightly as couples filled the dance floor. I shifted uncomfortably as pairs of eyes turned towards us. Some stared in contempt, others in disbelief.

Whispered conversations behind upraised hands began circulating around the room like some sort of new fashion trend.

I tugged on the sleeve of John's tunic until he tilted his head towards me.

"John, why is everyone staring at us?"

"Well, it may have escaped your attention, but I

the Prince."

"Careful now, if your head gets any bigger that crown might not fit" I replied back sarcastically.

I knew how people looked at a Prince, in awe or admiration, and that was most certainly not the way most of them were looking at us now.

It occurred to me that I was probably who they were staring at and gossiping about; or rather, the fact that I was standing with the Prince.

We're not together I wanted to tell them.

We're just friends.

The thought struck a painful cord in the pit of my stomach.

"Forget them" He said nonchalantly.

Forget them? That wasn't such an easy thing to do.

He may be used to it but I hated the attention.

Once again I felt they were judging me.

John cursed under his breath, so quietly I barely heard it, and making me aware of how close we were standing.

No wonder they stared.

Before I could take a step away John had grabbed my hand and was pulling me after him.

I wanted to ask what, or maybe who, had been the cause of his whispered curse when I realized he was leading me into the midst of the dancers and forgot all about my question.

My steps slowed down until he was almost dragging me before he turned to give me an exasperated look.

"You know I can't dance John."

"You're not near as bad as you think" He said with a half smile.

"I don't want to trip in front of everyone."

"I won't let you" He said firmly and continued pulling me along.

He only stopped when we stood almost in the center of the room, where dozens of other dancing couples made us less conspicuous.

His hand rested on my waist, warm and comfortable before leading us into the dance.

I had no idea what music was playing or what the dance required, but John seemed to know the steps well enough for the both of us. The few times I stumbled his grip would tighten around me, holding me steady until I regained my balance.

When the dance ended he made no move to leave, or even let go for that matter, and I found I didn't really want to stop anyway.

It was only moments before the next dance started up, and another after that. It soon felt natural dancing with him, even my stumbles causing less embarrassment than the time before. He was true to his word, covering up my stumbles just like I'd covered up his poor swordsmanship skills on our first duel. I relaxed more, letting the music wash over me with its soothing rhythms.

When I finally felt confident enough to stop watching my feet I regretted looking up.

All the women from the couples that danced around us were staring. It was one thing for those standing around with nothing better to do to be staring but this was ridiculous.

"There's something I wanted your opinion on."

His voice broke through my dread and I looked up, grateful for something else to concentrate on.

"Remember on our... adventure, all those girls who said they wanted to come to the castle to train?"

I nodded, remembering Sir Corry's little girls and the two from the camp in the forest.

"I was thinking about establishing a training school just for girls. Not many girls want to take a pages training with the boys, but maybe if they had their own school more would come."

"That sounds like an incredible idea John."

"Really? Because I was hoping you might consider teaching it..."

Now

I hadn't seen coming.

"I don't know John, I'm not that good with little kids."

"They wouldn't be that young, at least twelve or thirteen. At least think about it."

"Of course I will."

It was good to know he was finally taking being King seriously. Maybe if he had this school to plan, something to look forward to, the pressure wouldn't get to him so badly.

And if it was a success, which I was sure it would be, maybe it would be just the confidence booster he needed.

The song playing ended, and by this time I'd lost count of how many we'd danced together.

"Prince John, didn't anyone teach you how to share?"

He grinned and clapped Mason on the shoulder.

"No one's had the nerve to ask, and I wasn't about to give her up willingly" He said with a wink in my direction.

I rolled my eyes at him, causing them both to laugh.

"You can borrow her if she'll have you Mase, but the last dance is mine"

His hand still held on to mine and he brought it up to brush his lips against before letting go.

I watched him disappear into the crowd stunned, having been caught by surprise yet again. It was both infuriating and sweet how he charmed me so easily.

The next song started up and Mason took my hand. The feeling was different than with John, less... just less.

"My Lady is popular tonight" He said with a smile.

I glanced up at him in confusion, only half paying attention since I had to watch my steps; he didn't lead quite as confidently as John.

"What do you mean?"

"It seems everyone is talking about you."

Now I was definitely paying attention.

"Why would they be talking about me?" I asked in confusion.

He couldn't be right, they had all been staring at John, and they must be talking about him.

I looked wearily around me and noticed that while my dance partner had changed I was receiving no less attention.

He smirked slightly, reminding me of John; no wonder they got along so well.

"They all want to know how the castle tomboy finally got the Prince to dance. Golden girl, they've been calling you. It seems no one can believe the girl they see in the practice courts is really you."

I looked at him incredulously.

"You can't be serious."

"But I am" He insisted.

I looked around me once more, seeing envy, surprise, curiosity, and even downright hostility.

Golden girl? How silly.

"What did you mean by 'finally got the Prince to dance'?"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You mean you don't know?"

I shook my head, annoyed that John's new squire knew more than I did after only being at court for a little over a week.

He looked amused, but whether it was because I didn't know or because of what he was about to tell me I couldn't be sure.

"I'm told our Prince has never danced at the High Ball before."

My jaw dropped open in shock and I lost track of the steps, stumbling into Mason in the process.

He steadied me quickly with a slight smile and shake of the head but I hardly noticed.

He'd never danced at the High Ball before?

How could that possibly be true? He comes here every year!

But that would explain all the looks I was getting, all that golden girl nonsense.

Idiot Prince, he could have warned me.

I hated being the center of attention. He

that.

As if it wasn't bad enough I even let myself be seen with him, he had to go and make a big spectacle by dancing with me.

Mason was looking at me with amusement when the song ended and David walked up just then too, laughing at the expression on my face.

"What did he do this time?" David asked with a grin.

There was no question who

was.

Mason cut in before I could answer. "The problem seems to be that he danced with her."

"Is

what everyone's been talking about?" He said with a laugh.

"Well, I'm glad you two are amused, but if you'll excuse me I have a certain Prince to kill."

They each grabbed a hand before I could take so much as a step.

"You're not going anywhere till I have a dance" David said with a smirk.

"Or you could come with me to the courtyard to help dig the grave" I said sweetly.

Mason laughed and let go of my arm. "I'll go get My Lady a spade" He said with a grin before walking off. I scowled at him before turning the look to David.

As per usual he seemed indifferent to it and pulled me along to the music which I hadn't even realized had started.

"He should have warned me" I said sullenly.

"So you could turn him down? Not likely" He said with a grin.

I blushed slightly knowing it was true. If John had told me from before what would happen I would have said no, or at least insisted he dance with someone else first.

"Do you know what they're calling me?" I asked with a wince, hearing the name murmured from a couple that danced too close.

His grin widened even further.

"Golden girl. You should be flattered, even with being the castles resident lady knight, you've managed to out-do all the other girls here."

"I may look like a Lady but I certainly don't feel like one" I grumbled annoyed.

"But they don't know that do they? It was quite entertaining to watch all their jaws drop when they announced your name."

"Of course

would think that" I said with a roll of the eyes.

My lips twisted up in a smile. Come to think of it that would be fairly amusing.

David and I danced the next song as well, and the one after that was with Luke followed by Mason once again.

It seemed rather suspicious that one of the three always appeared by my side just as a song ended, making it impossible for anyone else to approach me.

Probably John's work.

I didn't really mind if it was; I was getting used to his sudden protectiveness of me.

The bells signalling the last dance of the evening chimed and John appeared by my side before their sound had even faded away.

Mason nodded at him before melting into the crowd once again.

The sight of him made me forget my annoyance as the familiar warmth spread through me from his touch.

"Miss me Golden Girl?" He asked with a smile, his voice husky and quiet.

"Miss you? I've spent almost the whole night with you."

"Is that a yes?" He whispered.

His familiar smirk tugged at his lips when I felt myself nodding.

"Why haven't you ever danced at the High Ball before? You come every year."

The question blurted out before I could stop it, but at least it didn't sound like an accusation.

He seemed to think about it for a moment before shrugging.

"I've never wanted to before."

"Why now?" I asked curiously.

He cocked an eyebrow and smiled sweetly. "Isn't it obvious?"

I looked down as my face heated up yet again in realization of what he'd just said.

I couldn't explain the elated way it made me feel to hear it.

So what if in a few days he would have to choose another girl to be his bride?

Tonight it didn't matter that I was a lady knight, and right now, I didn't care that they judged me.

Tonight I was golden girl,

and tonight at least,

he was all mine.

The Last Dance (32)

Here it is: the long awaited next chapter after all this time. Enjoy!

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 32 - Marriage Campaign

{The High Ball, Day 3}

John's POV

I looked away from the mirror, distinctly aware of how the Kingdom's coat of arms stood out against my pale grey tunic.

Another day, another ball, though this year was less tedious than the rest and it was no mystery why.

Castle attendants hovered around me, tentatively reaching out to adjust laces and collars; a nuisance I tried to endure gracefully.

After all, it wasn't their fault they had to follow orders.

My gaze fell on Mason leaning casually against the wall. I couldn't help but feel envious that he'd been ready for half

an hour now, exempt from the fussing hands of those that surrounded me.

Bad enough they wouldn't let me get dressed alone without the embarrassment of having someone else in the room.

I mean really, did they think I would forget my breeches without them around?

I cleared my throat loudly, and was satisfied by a hasty retreat. Much as I disliked making their job harder for them there was only so much I could take.

Breathing out a sigh of relief at the welcome space around me I ran a hand through my hair, ignoring the disapproving looks from the bolder attendants.

A thin gold crown was timidly placed on my head and with a final rustling of clothes they were all gone.

Finally.

From across the room Mason tossed my sword over. I strung it quickly through my belt, already feeling my annoyance melt into excitement at the thought of seeing Celia again tonight.

I threw open the door to my room and rushed outside, taking long strides down the hall. We'd barely turned the corner when another attendant came towards us.

What now? Did the belt not match my tunic?

"Your Highness" He said with a low bow.

I nodded impatiently, wanting to be off.

"His Royal Highness, the King, has requested your presence in the library my Prince."

I exchanged a curious look with Mason wondering what he could want.

"Thank you, did he say anything else?"

"Only that he wished you to come right away."

"Very well, we're on our way."

With another bow he left us and I reluctantly turned my footsteps in the other direction towards the library.

"The library? Why ever would he want to meet you there? Why not the throne room as usual?" Mason said beside me.

The same question had occurred to me.

"He must not want anyone else to know" I mused aloud.

And that in itself was unusual, my father never did anything in secret, he said it might breed suspicion into the Kingdom.

I quickened my steps and heard Mason do the same until we reached the empty hallway where the library was.

I contemplated the door for a few moments, not wanting to go in.

"Just get it over with John" Mase said into the silence.

I nodded grimly and pushed the door open, letting it fall shut behind me. I knew he'd be waiting out there when I got out and that was somehow reassuring.

The King had been facing away from me when I entered and had slowly turned around at the noise. I took a few steps forward until we faced each other and waited for him to break the silence.

"Johnathan we need to talk."

Well, that didn't sound like a good start.

"What about?" I asked carefully.

He shifted around uncomfortably, eyes darting around the room as if looking for some kind of support, and suddenly I knew exactly what this was about.

The silence was near oppressive as the unspoken subject hung heavy in the air. I swallowed hard, feeling a mounting sense of dread come over me.

I should have known this was coming.

The last two nights it had felt like if I just ignored it, it would all go away. It had been so easy not to think about it, so easy to be distracted.

How stupid.

How naive.

My father walked over to a chair and sat down heavily, as if the words weighed him down.

With a tense motion he gestured for me to take the chair opposite.

I went there with small steps, lowering myself slowly to prolong the inevitable just a few seconds longer.

Comfort was impossible even in a chair covered with cushions and I sat at the edge of my seat, poised to run.

As if I could.

I was trapped, just as I'd always been.

He cleared his throat, glanced around the empty room one last time and took a breath.

I tensed in my seat, felt my hands curl over the armrests with a vicelike grip.

"I... heard Celia made quite an impression last night."

I released the breath I was holding, felt a smile tug at my lips despite the circumstances.

"I always knew she would."

I could still see her at the top of the stairs, eyes wide with fear, biting her lip with worry. It all just made her that much more stunning. Halfway down her eyes had wandered the crowds, and I dared hope it was for me.

"Really? Always?"

I jerked out of my reverie at my father's bemused voice and saw his eyebrows arched in surprise.

It took me a moment to register his words and when I did a slight flush crept up my neck.

"Well, I know now" I answered back ruefully.

"You've hardly left her side since you've been back" He replied thoughtfully.

"We're friends."

My voice came out harsher than I'd intended, defensive, and with the look I received back I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince.

"The end of the ball is fast approaching son" His voice was pained, sympathetic.

The subtle change of topic took me by surprise.

Had the circumstances been different his words would be nothing out of the ordinary, but now they rang with significance.

A strong implication stood behind those words and we both knew what it was.

Suddenly I was angry.

He had no right to pity me.

He had

idea.

No

what this was doing to me.

It had been easy for him; he'd never been under the obligation I was now under. How could he pretend to understand?

He didn't, he

.

"Your point?" I asked through clenched teeth.

He sighed in resignation, not even phased by my poorly contained anger.

He'd expected this reaction.

"My point is that you've hardly spoken to anyone at the ball. How do you expect to find anyone that way? You don't even try."

I could feel the anger building up, the words forcing their way out of my mouth.

"And you think two days, even

days will do the trick? That I can somehow get to know someone well enough to

them?"

The word hung in the air between us, the one we'd both avoided saying until now. It hung heavy with a thousand expectations, a thousand questions, doubts and fears, and somewhere deeper, a heart on the verge of breaking.

My voice came out a cold whisper, each word dripping with disdain.

"What's the point? What does it matter? Let them choose for all I care, it all ends up being the same. I never really had a choice in the matter, why bother playing the game? I quit."

His eyes hardened, but just as fast his gaze lowered, unable to face me.

"I never wanted this for you Johnathan."

"But you're letting it happen."

Without waiting for a reply I stood up to leave the room.

I opened the door more forcefully than necessary and slammed it shut as I left.

One look at Mason's expression told me he'd heard everything we'd said inside. It was a small relief knowing someone else shared the burden.

"Keep an eye on her for me Mase." I heard my voice crack, the image from yesterday coming back to me again. I couldn't face her just yet, not like this.

He nodded immediately and I quickly walked away, not glancing back to see if either of them followed; I knew they had the sense not to.

It was all so unfair. Finally I'd fallen in love, and it had to be with the one girl I couldn't have. Or rather, the one who wouldn't have me.

Hadn't we both known it all these days? That I would have to pick someone else?

And yet I couldn't help but keep her selfishly for myself the last two nights, hardly sparing a glance for the other girls in the room.

She drew my eyes to her constantly and it was impossible to look away, not that I wanted to.

Everyone paled in comparison, and judging by yesterday, they knew it.

If only she could see it, if only I could convince her to see it then maybe she would...

I let the thought trail off, not daring to get my hopes up.

It wouldn't make a difference.

Even if she liked me, even if she loved me, she'd never want to be Queen. I've always known that. It's the only thing I've ever been sure about with her. It's even what made me fall in love with her; because she didn't even try, never treated me any different, if anything harsher, as if to remind me I was no different from the rest.

Ironic really that the reason I loved her was the same reason I couldn't have her.

It was so unfair.

What was I supposed to do?

Pick someone at random?

They were all the same to me. None stood out, none had an ounce of personality and yet one was meant to be my Queen.

How could any of them possibly be a better choice than her? Not just for me but for the Kingdom as well.

Highbourne didn't need two clueless monarchs who didn't know the land or people, it needed someone real, and it needed change. I couldn't do that alone, and I couldn't do it with some highborn Lady taught all her life to never argue with a Prince whether his decision was stupid or not.

"You're Highness!"

I winced inwardly and looked around me realizing I'd accidentally come to one of the guest hallways.

With a forced smile I turned around to see Lady Helena rushing towards me, a young lady trailing behind.

Perfect.

Just what I needed right now I thought sarcastically.

"Lady Helena... what an... unexpected surprise."

And unwelcome.

"Now didn't I say we'd have the pleasure of speaking again one night?"

"Of course... how could I forget?"

I glanced around, hoping for someone to come out of a room or enter the hall, anything to escape from this, but of course there wasn't another soul in sight.

"This is a most fortuitous meeting my Prince, may I introduce my daughter, the Lady Petunia?"

"If you must" I mumbled under my breath.

"I am most honoured my Prince."

As if you could say anything else if you weren't.

I probably couldn't pay Cece to say that, the thought made me smile.

She curtsied deeply and stood up, not directly meeting my eyes.

I assumed the action was meant to display innocence but it was all for moot since her dress was so appallingly tight and revealing.

"Well met Lady Petunia" I said gravely, hoping they might take the hint.

No such luck.

"If I may be so bold my Prince, you rode excellently in this week's tourney."

"I thank you."

I looked around again wondering at the sudden lack of activity in the hall.

Where was everyone?

Where was an attendant when you needed one?

Surely they'd forgotten to fasten a pin or tie a lace that they simply had to track me down for.

And where were all the other guests? Shouldn't at least some be out by now heading towards the ballroom?

I tuned out of the conversation, only putting in an occasional word or nod of the head.

As if I needed another conversation filled with marriage implications.

And if that wasn't bad enough, both women managed to squeeze a 'my prince' into every sentence.

I started keeping count.

One...

Three...

Somebody help me...

Seven...

The girl Petunia seemed intent on engaging me in conversation, bringing up marriage and dancing even more frequently than her mother.

Good grief.

I suspect she hoped I'd beg of her to save me a dance. She was all but asking me herself.

There was something about her I didn't trust, something incredibly fake. I'd gotten very good at detecting insincerity.

"John!"

Oh thank goodness for squires, I'm saved.

I turned around to see Mason walking towards me and very nearly hugged him, I was that relieved.

"Ladies" He said with a quick bow to Lady Helena and her daughter.

"Where have you been John? They're waiting for you to open the doors."

Of course! Why hadn't I remembered that? I could have gotten out of this painful conversation earlier.

Lady Petunia glared at Mason reproachfully, whether because he'd interrupted her monologue or because he'd

addressed me so casually I couldn't be sure. Probably both, but I could hardly be bothered to care, I just wanted out of here.

"I'd forgotten! Come on, we shouldn't keep them waiting."

Without waiting for a response I grabbed hold of his arm and nearly dragged him out of the hall.

As soon as we turned the corner he burst out laughing.

"What was that all about?"

"

was the royal marriage campaign, apparently it's quite popular today" I replied with exasperation, prompting another laugh from him.

We turned another corner and reached the entrance. I slipped in ahead of my parents as soon as the door was opened, and made my way towards the throne dais at the end of the room determined not to look at either one of them.

We took our places, each in front of a throne while Mason stood slightly off to the side, and waited for the main doors to be pulled open.

With a loud groan they were pushed open and a sea of people flooded in, disturbing the quiet from a moment before.

I kept my gaze fixed on a spot just above the guests to be sure I wouldn't make eye contact with anyone.

Once everyone had gathered inside my father made his usual speech welcoming everyone to the High Ball, saying what a pleasure it was to have the Kingdom come together, so on and so on, until he ended with a final 'we hope you enjoy your evening'.

Applause broke out around the room and as it died down the musicians started up signalling the beginning of the ball.

With a quick nod at Mase I slipped around the back of the thrones, using him as cover to walk unnoticed to the door leading to the courtyard.

I took a deep breath of the night air, only getting a moments peace before the events of the last few hours caught up with me.

My father's words rang in my head, mocking and cruel though they hadn't been intended that way.

'I never wanted this for you.'

'You don't even try.'

And why should I? My options all consisted of women like Lady Helena, selling daughters like Petunia who couldn't see anything past 'My Prince'.

Is that what you want father?

Shall I make

my Queen?

'You've hardly spoken to anyone at the ball. How do you expect to find anyone that way? You don't even try.'

'You don't even try.'

I pushed my hand forcefully through my hair in frustration, remembering too late the crown that had been resting there.

I looked around in time to see it clatter to the ground behind me.

I glared at it sullenly.

To think that little band of gold was the cause of all my problems.

Celia's POV

Whispers of Golden Girl still followed me around the ballroom despite the cerulean blue dress I'd picked up fresh from the castle tailors. I would have thought the novelty of the name would wear off with the night, but I had no such luck.

Was it such a wonder that I could look the part of a Lady?

Yes, I suppose it was. I'd thought the same for the last two nights and again today.

I made my way through the crowds, trying my best to ignore both the heads that turned my way and those that turned quickly away.

What I wouldn't give for the anonymity I'd had the first night, inconspicuous and invisible thanks to a mask of lace.

If only.

What did they say about me behind their raised hands and lowered eyes?

Some held my gaze with thinly veiled contempt while others stared obliviously with awe. Either way it was all the same, they were always judging.

What right did they have to hate me so?

Even to think so highly of me?

They didn't know me. Not one of them.

I was just something to stare at, someone to gossip about, barely human.

I hated it.

Why was I any different from the rest of them?

I wasn't anything special, a knight maybe, but nothing more.

At the end of the day I was just plain old Celia, not Golden Girl or even a Lady.

A dress didn't change who I was.

I quickened my pace, automatically scanning the crowd for a mess of golden hair.

For once I'd come on time, filing in with the rest of the guests. John had been standing sullenly in front of the throne, eyes averted and not seeing anything.

I'd lost sight of him when the crowds raised their hands in applause, and when the music started up he was gone.

My search was interrupted by a tap on my shoulder and I turned around to come face to face with a young man I didn't recognize.

Well, I suppose this had to happen sooner or later, it was the High Ball after all, the marriage market.

"Good evening Lady Celia."

He bowed stiffly, as if he thought the action beneath him.

I curtsied slightly, not in inch lower than he had.

He knew me? How did he know me?

Or right, yesterdays presentation.

Well, I suppose it was a small blessing he didn't call me Golden Girl, but how was I supposed to respond? I hadn't the faintest idea of his name.

"You may remember me from the tourney? I placed in the top ten" He continued after a moment's pause.

I felt a slight blush creep up my cheeks.

"Most remarkable my Lord... but I'm afraid your name escapes me."

A slight flash of annoyance crossed his face but was immediately replaced with a lazy smile brimming with overconfidence.

"No matter, I daresay you lost interest early, a tourney is hardly of concern for a woman."

I barely managed to keep a scowl off my face at his arrogance. Clearly he was one of those men, the kind who thought girls didn't belong anywhere near the practice field.

Did he even know who he was talking to?

Clearly no one had bothered to inform him of who I really was.

"To be sure" I said coolly "I much prefer the sword."

He looked surprised, the barest hint of a frown touching his lips.

His eyes appraised me for a moment and he seemed to be thinking, probably if it was worth continuing this conversation.

I hoped not.

With another reluctant bow he held a hand out towards me.

"Would you favour me with a dance my Lady?"

"My apologies Lord Holden, but I'm afraid this dance was promised to me."

I smiled with relief as Mason walked up next to me, an easy grin on his face.

"Of course, perhaps another time" Lord Holden said stiffly before walking away.

"Hello Mason" I said with a wide smile. "Your timing is impeccable."

"Why thank you Cee, but now I believe you owe me a dance."

With a wary look at the dance floor I took his hand.

"If it were anyone else Mase..."

He laughed lightly.

"Well if you'd prefer Lord Holden..." He trailed off.

I shook my head with a grimace and led us to the edge of the dance floor fringed in shadows.

The music picked up into an easy rhythm, one I could actually follow. Slightly more confidant that I wouldn't trip over myself, I looked up at my partner to see a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

His eyes flickered over to me and he let out a heavy sigh.

"John..." He mumbled.

"Has something happened?"

"Not... yet."

I watched his expression change from worried to uneasy and stared in confusion, waiting for him to elaborate.

He only shook his head.

"You should hear it from him."

I waited until the song was over and headed towards the door that led to the private courtyard.

With a quick glance around, I slipped out unseen in the rush between dances when everyone looked to find a new partner.

The courtyard was decorated differently today; a surprise since it rarely saw guests.

Candles in little glass holders lined the path, while covered lanterns hid in every bush along the way, making the greenery seem to glow from within.

The path had the customary sprinkling of cherry blossoms, but a layer of rose petals had been tossed over the cobblestones and surrounding grass.

A sudden gust of wind had everything swirling up in a halo of sweetly smelling perfumes. They danced in the air for a moment before floating back to the ground.

I knew I would find him here, drawing the same comfort from this place as I always had.

A nagging feeling tugged at my chest, wondering what could be bothering him.

I knew something must be wrong. His mask of brooding silence tonight was a stark contrast to the playful and sweet demeanour he'd had the last two nights.

I kept my footsteps light, not wanting the sound to give away my presence before I was ready.

He was faced away from me, leaning against the tree and outlined in a perfect silhouette made by the nearly full moon above him.

The branches of the tree, heavy with pale pink blossoms just brushed the top of his golden hair.

He stood so perfectly still he could almost be a statue, save for the crown that hung idly from his fingers, swinging gently in the ghost of a breeze.

I felt myself walking again, causing the living statue to come alive, if only barely, to turn his head in my direction.

He smiled sadly watching my approach, only turning back to face the cloudless sky when we stood side by side.

I turned my eyes up to the stars, remembering the night he'd been so troubled by not knowing me. His mood seemed the same, as if his thoughts were far off, as far off as the twinkling stars we watched.

I waited for him to break the silence; to tell me what was wrong. I was anxious to hear what could have happened in the hours before the ball to bring about this change in him.

He remained silent though, until it started to become uncomfortable. It was as though a wall had been erected between us, keeping him from saying what was on his mind.

Or perhaps his reluctance came from the nature of what he needed to say.

Either way, I knew I would have to say something to break the silence, something that might lighten the mood, make things seem less awkward.

"John if you keep hiding out here like this, you'll never find a wife."

The words blurted from my mouth teasingly, but I winced the moment they were out, wishing I could take them back.

Why had I said that?

His features tightened ever so slightly before he wordlessly pulled me into a hug.

Surprised, I hugged him back, wondering how what I'd said could have prompted this response.

I couldn't help but feel like something was off, but a moment later he let go, a cheery smile on his face that didn't reach his eyes.

Suddenly I knew the reason for his hug; a chance to compose himself and hide whatever emotion he didn't want me seeing.

"Maybe I've already found one" He mused softly.

His voice was teasing, as mine had been, but I didn't miss the strain behind the words. Nor could I identify the source of the pain that lanced through me.

I struggled to turn my wince into a smile, but I knew it didn't quite get there.

"That's great."

He only nodded before looking away again.

He pushed away from the tree, walking towards the trellis just beyond it.

After a moment's hesitation I followed him, swallowing back the lump in my throat along the way.

Another silence overtook us, as awkward as before. This time he was the one to break it, the words coming out in a rush.

"Do you think it's possible to love someone you hardly know?"

I would have thought it was a joke if he hadn't asked so seriously.

I couldn't help the disappointment that washed over me, and was grateful he hadn't looked at me to ask the question for fear of what he might see on my face.

I didn't even know how to answer.

That was the last kind of question I'd expect from John. I took a few deep breaths to make sure my voice would come out steady when I answered.

"No... but... you can as you get to know them" I replied back slowly, fighting back a sudden urge to cry.

"And if it only goes one way?" He asked back immediately.

He looked at me helplessly and I gave him as reassuring a smile as I could muster.

"I suppose that's a chance you have to take. Sometimes you just have to trust that things will work out for themselves."

He sighed and smiled sadly again, shaking his head from side to side. "I don't have that kind of time."

I needed something to lighten the mood; properly this time.

I looked up at the sky, searching for the brightest star I could see before pointing up at it.

"See that star?"

His eyes followed the direction of my hand. "Yes."

"Make a wish."

He half smiled at me. "You're kidding right?"

I raised my eyebrows at him and he closed his eyes with a sigh in resignation.

I wrinkled my forehead in concentration thinking of a good wish. When no ideas came to mind I wished that John's would come true.

When I opened my eyes it was to see him watching me with amusement.

Let him think I was silly if he wanted, at least

smile reached his eyes.

The wind picked up, suddenly whipping my hair into my face.

I shook my head only to have it blown right back. He laughed suddenly and with two steps forward, covered the already small distance between us.

Without any hesitation he raised a hand and brushed a strand back behind my ear.

I felt my face flush and blamed my sudden goosebumps and chills on the cold and not from the feel of his hand against my cheek.

He looked down at me and smiled.

We were so close that I could easily have turned my face up an inch and kissed him.

The scary part was how tempted I was to do just that when more words tumbled from my mouth, ruining the moment.

"Who's the girl?"

A mixture of emotions ran through his face while I waited anxiously for an answer.

I dreaded knowing but couldn't help my overwhelming curiosity.

Was it someone I knew?

A friend?

My stomach clenched painfully as his features finally settled into a wistful expression.

He glanced up at the stars before looking back down, his voice a slight whisper I could only hear because of our proximity.

"You?"

I felt my eyes widen in shock and automatically took a step back.

That answer was even worse than a name I knew. At least then I could fake a smile and move on. But this... this was torture.

It was the last answer I'd expected but oddly the one I wanted.

It was one word, a simple question, but there was no easy answer.

A fierce battle was taking place in my mind, a thousand reasons why I should, a million why I couldn't.

There were too many strings attached, too many uncertainties and what if's, too many doubts and fears.

It was a question that gave rise to dozens more and I couldn't answer any.

'Say yes.'

'I can't be Queen!'

'It doesn't matter you need him.'

'Did I? Did I need him?'

'It's selfish.'

'You can't.'

'I want to.'

'Say yes.'

'Don't do it.'

'He's worth it.'

'It's too big a risk.'

'You'll regret it forever.'

'The Kingdom's more important.'

'You want to.'

'I can't.'

'Say yes.'

'Don't do it!'

Why did this have to happen now?

Why so soon?

It was too early, much too early. We'd only just become friends. Things were starting to change. I couldn't do this yet. It was too early to tell if we could last.

Why so soon?

Why now?

"Why me?"

The words came out another whisper, a desperate attempt to find more time, to find an answer, and almost an accusation.

"Why

you?" He defended.

Was that the best reason he could come up with? If so, it was almost unbearably disappointing. I found myself getting angry.

"Because this isn't who I am! I may look the part now but it doesn't change anything. I'm no dress wearing court lady, I live for the field. Everyone in there is easily a better choice. They would know what to do, I never would."

"You just can't see it, you're exactly what this Kingdom needs" He insisted stubbornly, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"How would you know? Until two weeks ago you didn't think

could be King. You

"

The words came out harsher than I'd intended, more an accusation than an argument.

His face fell to a look of hurt and I felt immediately guilty. So easily we fell back to our old habits. Exactly what I feared would happen in the long run.

"John... I didn't mean--"

"No, you're right" He said cutting me off.

"You will be a great King John... but not with me... I just... can't" I said in a strained voice, trying to hold back my tears.

"Why not? We could be great together, I

we could" He argued back, instantly furious again.

"

can you know? We may get along now, but how long will it last? A few weeks of kindness compared to years of hatred, think about it! It's too much to risk, too much to lose. We haven't had enough time yet, this is all too soon."

"And what time do I have with the rest in there? The rest that I don't even

? Isn't

a risk?"

"So you want to marry me because I'm not a stranger?"

"No! Because I... I just..."

He trailed off looking anguished leaving whatever he'd wanted to say unspoken.

"This is about so much more than just

John."

"What then? What is it about?"

"It's about Highbourne! A few people here may accept a Lady Knight but a thousand more don't. They would never respect me; never really see me as their Queen. You have to think about the Kingdom John."

"I have! My whole life I have! I've done everything for the Kingdom, for the people, for Highbourne... and now you want me to lose you too?"

"I'm not going anywhere John."

"It's not the

"

His shoulders slumped in defeat as a look of resignation came over him, knowing it was useless to fight anymore.

I bitterly realized my point had been proven for me, hadn't we just spent all this time yelling at each other?

He turned to walk away, and immediately turned back.

He paced in front of me looking in turns hurt and angry and so, so lost while I just watched on helplessly. Anything I did would only make it worse.

I'd hurt him enough.

He finally stopped his walking to face me, his expression indiscernible in the shadow of the tree.

"I don't... I don't think we can be friends anymore."

The words cut through me painfully and it was a struggle to compose my voice.

"If that's what you want."

He laughed bitterly and shook his head.

"It isn't, but what I want doesn't matter remember?"

When I didn't answer he turned around and walked away without a backwards glance.

I collapsed down on the bench, my hand coming down on something cold. Picking it up I realized it was his crown, somehow left behind in all the chaos.

Our argument caught up to me with the force of a brick wall leaving me feeling breathless with hurt.

Why was this so hard?

Maybe because I couldn't stand the thought of him being with anyone else, that someone other than me would make him laugh, or smile, or even cry.

Maybe because... I loved him.

I loved him... and it was too late.

We weren't even friends anymore.

How could I run after him now?

And what difference could it make?

None.

It didn't change anything.

Except that maybe now I truly realized what I had lost.

I heard the distant sound of the door clicking shut and looked back down at the crown in my hands.

To think this little band of gold was the cause of all my problems.

The bells chimed signalling the last dance of the night. The dance we'd shared the past two nights, but no more.

With that thought I finally gave in to the tears I'd held back all night; the gentle music my only remaining comfort.

The Last Dance (33)

Sorry it took so long, this chapter was really hard to write since there are a lot of characters involved.

Also, thanks to everyone who sent me songs that reminded them of the story I wish I could use them all, but instead I'll list them at the end for whoever wants to listen.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 33 - Last Dance

{The High Ball, Day 4}

Mira's POV

"Celia?"

I inched the door open and saw that she was still in bed despite the hour. The sun was shining brightly, sending shafts of light across the sheets, but she'd buried herself under them like a cocoon.

"I can't do it; I can't see him fall for another girl."

Her voice came out muffled from under the covers but I could hear the panic under her words easily.

I immediately knew what she was talking about.

"You might not have to Cee, it... could be you."

She pushed herself up from the bed, her face red and tear streaked.

She shook her head sadly, a rueful smile on her face. "It

have been me... until I blew it."

"What do you mean?"

She started talking, half unintelligible with grief about everything that had happened last night. I could feel my eyes getting wider and wider even though I only understood part of what she was saying.

"I didn't realize it until it was too late, until he was already gone that..."

"That?" I prompted.

"That I... love him."

I could feel my mouth drop open in shock. Before I could even attempt a response she started talking again.

"But it doesn't matter. He doesn't even want to be friends anymore" She buried her head in her hands.

Her words shocked me once again, but now I had to say something.

"Oh Cee... I'm sure that's not true, he was just angry and confused. He probably didn't even mean it."

I hoped she could hear the truth behind my words. I so badly wanted them to be true for her sake.

"Even if he didn't... I don't have the guts to go find out. I can't face him again knowing how I feel..."

"And what if he feels the same way?" It was obvious he did, but I didn't think she could handle hearing it.

"Then... then we're just worse off than we were before because everything is still too new to know if things will ever work. But even then, I would have... I

to say yes only... he didn't... he didn't give me a reason too. I asked him why me? And he couldn't think of a single thing. Not one reason" She babbled out forlornly.

I opened my mouth to reply but no words came out.

I really had no argument for that. I almost didn't want to believe it, that John would really have nothing to say in a moment like that... but one look at her face told me it was true, told me how much it was hurting her.

One look told me she wouldn't put herself out there to get hurt again.

I knew her. I knew how much it must have cost her to say those two little words 'why me?' and to dare hope that they could be together.

But one look told me she wouldn't let herself hope for that again.

When I looked back again she'd already made her way to the dresser, picking up the gown that had come fresh from the palace tailors.

Her back was to me as she let the soft material slip through her fingers, and it seemed almost ironic that today of all days they would send a black dress. Almost as if she were in mourning, which maybe in a way she was.

She disappeared into the bathroom for only a few moments before coming out looking cool and detached, as if she hadn't spent the whole night crying.

It hurt to see her so dejected, but even so I couldn't help but notice how stunning the dress looked on her. The dark color of the dress made her skin look pale and pristine, with the silver and blue accents causing her downcast eyes to look wide and vibrant. She walked stiffly to her dresser and applied a light coat of pale pink color to her lips, avoiding my gaze the entire time. Lastly she picked up a thin silver chain strung with a teardrop shaped blue pendant and fastened it behind her neck.

Her eyes flickered to her nightstand and I followed her gaze to see the bracelet John had given her laying there. She stared at it for almost a minute before turning away, blinking rapidly and headed out the door without once having looked in the mirror and I knew that even more than John, she was afraid to face herself.

David's POV

I paced back and forth across the door. What was taking him so long?

I raised my hand to knock for the fifth time, this time determined to actually do it when the door finally opened up. Several attendants rushed out and I had to step quickly to the side to avoid getting trampled.

With a light chuckle I walked in "Now Johnny, what have you done this time?"

My smile faltered at the sight in front of me.

John was red faced and breathing deeply while Mason stood in the farthest corner grimacing.

It wouldn't have been anything out of the ordinary really, until I saw the condition of the room.

John was always an organized person; orderly to the point of obsession when it came to his room, so nothing could have prepared me for this.

Clothes were strewn everywhere, many ripped by the looks of it, chairs and a shelf knocked over, the mirror shattered with glass peeking out from a sheet that had been hastily thrown over it. A pillow had been ripped apart, the feathers scattered around the room, and the wastebasket had been upended, the garbage carelessly kicked around.

I quickly shoved the door closed and locked it before anyone else could get a glimpse inside.

I exchanged an uneasy look with Mason and tilted my head towards John, who was pointedly refusing to look at either of us.

"John--"

"I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!"

The reaction caught me off guard, as did his sudden beeline for the door. I only just managed to catch hold of sleeve and noticed Mason had a hold of his other.

He struggled against us, overcome with some kind of rage I'd never seen before.

Resealing the door, we pulled him to the bed and forced him to sit down.

"What happened in here John" I demanded, all trace of joking gone from my voice.

"I COULDN'T FIND MY CROWN OKAY?"

I glanced around the room once more. This wasn't a mess made from looking for something; everything in here was deliberately destroyed.

"Does this have anything to do with Celia?"

Mason's voice had me whipping my head back towards John.

His struggling stopped abruptly, the look of anger flashing to desperation before the fight went completely out of him.

He slumped over, drained of energy, a look of complete sorrow coming over him, but still that desperation didn't leave his eyes.

We let go at the same time, and he immediately raised one hand to run through his hair, a nervous habit he'd never managed to shake.

I held my breath, not quite daring to say anything yet.

I waited a minute, hoping the silence would calm him, but his actions didn't get any less erratic. We didn't have much time before he had to be at the ballroom, and there was no way he could go like this.

"What happened last night John?" I asked as calmly as I could.

His anger seemed to flare up for a moment and I tensed, ready to hold him down again, but he wasn't going anywhere.

His features twisted into some kind of bitter remembrance, the desperation clearer than ever, as if he wished he could forget.

"What happened is that she said no. IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR? She said no..."

His face twisted up in pain at the last three words which he was trying vainly not to show.

I didn't have to know what had happened to understand what he said.

There could only be one possible meaning.

I could almost feel my heart breaking for him.

"It's my fault" He whispered.

I held back a sigh of exasperation, only John would blame himself for something like this.

"How could it possibly be your fault? You can't stop being a Prince."

He shook his head roughly.

"It wasn't about that, or at least it was only an excuse... but I didn't... I didn't give her a reason... I didn't tell her how I

... I tried to and I

, and now it's too late."

"If you love her it's not too late John" I looked to Mason for confirmation, but his face was turned away, hiding a scowl he probably didn't want us to see.

"It is. It

too late. I said we shouldn't be friends, basically that I didn't want anything to do with her."

"You can still--"

"I

. You weren't there. You didn't hear the fight. It doesn't matter."

"Of course it

"

I could feel my own anger rising, but he'd shut himself off from my arguments. Already his face was unreadable, completely emotionless. Like he'd made up his mind and was following it through no matter how much it hurt him.

He stood up abruptly and neither of us made a move to stop him.

"I have to decide tomorrow.

; and if it's not her then I have to get over it and move on."

He'd turned his back on us, his hand already reaching towards the door but neither of us made a move to stop him.

"Don't fool yourself John. You'll never get over this, not if you let her go."

My voice came out a whisper but I knew he heard me perfectly. He stood still for a moment, and then without a word he strode out into the hallway, letting the door fall shut behind him.

Girl in Orange's POV

I stood in front of the mirror, smoothing out the creases on my black dress and couldn't help but smirk in satisfaction.

There was no way the Prince could ignore me in this.

It fit me like a silk glove, hugging all the right places. No one would be able to look away tonight, which is the way it should have been from the beginning.

I deserved to be the center of attention, not that Celia girl everyone kept talking about. I clenched my fists and took a deep breath. I couldn't let myself think about that now.

I picked up the shining band of gold from my bag where it had been all night. If that wasn't a sign what was?

It had just been sitting on a bench, begging me to take it in that silly little courtyard the Prince was always disappearing off to.

Not that I planned to keep it, but one night couldn't hurt could it?

Feeling a thrill of excitement I placed it carefully in my hair, setting it just right.

Perfect.

This was what I was meant for, this was my future.

It was with great reluctance that I finally removed it, biding my time to be suitably late. That Celia wasn't the only one who could make an entrance. I was determined to outshine her and didn't doubt for a second that I could.

With one last check I sauntered out into the halls, enjoying the echoing click clack my heels made against the tiled floors.

Tonight was my night.

I took a deep breath outside the double doors, almost wishing I could make my entrance from the top of the stairs. What a show THAT would be.

A lone beauty at the top of the stairs...

I'd wait for them to notice my entrance, for the nudging throughout the crowd as every face turned my way...

The whispers at my sudden appearance wondering who this girl could be... and then I'd descend... the swan in a sea of paltry ducks...

And then the whispering would start again... they'd all know my name... the boys would line up at the bottom, begging for a dance...

But my eyes would be only for the Prince and his only for me...

I could see it. I could

it, and I wanted it.

I wanted it more than anything and I was determined to have it.

But regrettably, that fantasy couldn't happen, not yet at least. It should have happened the night of my presentation, but that fool girl stole all my glory.

I took a deep breath and unclenched my fists.

Soon.

Soon he would be mine and that fantasy would become a reality.

Perhaps on our wedding day...I mused silently.

I fought to keep the giddy smile off my face, and pushed open the door. The guests standing closest turned in my direction and I fixed my expression to be calm and unaffected.

Really, it was no surprise that they stared. Great beauties such as me learned to suffer the attention.

I let my gaze skim over the guests near me and scanned the rest of the room. There seemed to be a large group gathered near the end of the ballroom opposite the stairs where I now stood. I didn't know what could be going on, but if there was a crowd then that was where I was meant to be.

I made my way delicately over and realized with growing excitement that the crowd of girls was gathered around the Prince.

Finally,

he was on his own. It was about time! That upstart, thinks-she-can-be-a-lady sham of a girl didn't deserve the attention my soon to be husband paid her. Or for that matter the attention of the entire court!

She may have fooled all of them but not me!

By the looks of things, they'd gotten into some sort of fight, and as far as I was concerned that was good news for me.

What more of a sign could I possible need?

Fate was practically begging me to make him mine.

I elbowed my way through the crowd that surrounded the Prince, ignoring the indignant huffs as I fought my way to the front.

"Prince Johnathan" I greeted, breathless with excitement.

He glanced towards me, and knowing how my dress complimented my figure, I curtsied low and took my time rising, but couldn't help showing annoyance when I was up. He wasn't even looking in my direction anymore.

I cleared my throat and his gaze shot back to me once more.

"Lady Petunia."

I barely had the time to shoot him a dazzling smile before he'd turned away again.

Forcing my features to keep up my smile I turned to see where he was looking and felt it instantly falter.

Unbelievable.

He was watching that stupid wench who called herself a lady.

No way.

There was no way I was letting her steal his attention from me. This was

night. If he would just come to his senses for a minute he'd drop her in a heartbeat, I was sure of it.

And I was determined to make it happen.

Mira's POV

I walked around in a daze, barely recovered from my conversation with Celia.

How I'd made it back to my room and gotten dressed was somewhat of a mystery to me. The silence had been overwhelming, but at the same time words were impossible after her admission, words that continued to ring in my head.

I still couldn't believe she'd actually admitted to being in love with John.

We'd all seen it the second she came back from the woods, but for her to actually realize it, to actually

it, was the closest to a miracle I've ever seen... which of course just made everything else that much worse.

There had to be a way to fix this... but I had no idea how. They were both just so stubborn and I didn't know the Prince well enough to convince him of anything.

I looked over to the throne dais where John had been all night. I could barely make him out over the crowd of girls who insisted on swarming around him.

It was pathetic.

Pathetic that they would move in on him now when for the first time he wasn't with Celia.

I could see him reluctantly talking to a girl in a black dress. She suddenly burst out laughing so loudly it was impossible not to hear. I had a feeling it was all for show since I sincerely doubted John would be making jokes when he was so obviously unhappy.

Pushing through the crowds I spotted David watching Cee dance with Luke. She'd disappeared after our talk, slipping into the ball unnoticed just as the last girl descended the stairs.

If she'd been aiming for discretion she'd certainly had good timing; the fourth night's presentation always had a greater deal of fanfare at the end since it was the last one of the ball.

She'd kept to the shadows, and may have succeeded in blending in with her dark dress, if her skin didn't glow so pale against the fabric.

Someone had cornered her almost immediately, but before I'd even taken a step to help, Mason had appeared by her side to get her away.

No one dared argue with the Prince's own squire.

I'd kept an eye on her all night, watching as the boys took turns distracting her with idle talk and countless dances, but

I couldn't stand by and watch any longer.

The night was ticking away and something had to be done.

If anyone could help me, it would be David.

David's POV

They were both so impossible.

I thought it was only a matter of time before they got together, and the way they'd acted the first two nights it seemed like a done deal...

But of course it could never be that simple, not with John and Celia. Only

could possibly screw up something that's so obviously meant to be.

He was too scared to say he loved her and she was too scared to say yes. It was completely ridiculous.

Couldn't they see how perfect they were for each other?

Everyone else certainly could, if all the whispers were any indication.

What good was it doing either of them to be so miserable?

John hadn't moved an inch from his slouch in the throne, nodding absently at a girl who'd managed to push her way to the front of the crowd. I winced slightly as her ear-splitting laugh filled the room and shuddered on John's behalf for having to put up with her.

It was sad really, how desperately they all vied for his attention despite his mournful expression.

I followed his gaze back to Celia, where it had been all night.

The poor fool.

Not that she seemed any better off. If anything she only masked her feelings for his sake.

She was dancing with Luke, and if it wasn't obvious her thoughts were elsewhere, the stumble on every other step gave it away.

The three of us had stayed with Celia all night, occupying her and keeping all other suitors far away. It was the least we could do for John. He hadn't asked for the favour like he had two nights ago, but I knew he wanted it all the same.

Right now, it would have killed him to see her talking with another guy. It probably even hurt him to see her with us, but what other choice was there?

"David?"

I turned around and smiled immediately at seeing Mira.

In all the chaos with John I'd completely taken for granted that her friends must be in the same position we were; desperately wanting to help and not knowing how.

"Mira, good to see you, how's... how was Celia doing?"

Her expression turned gloomy, as I suspect it had been all night just like the rest of us. She glanced back at John and smiled ruefully.

"About as well as our Prince."

"We need to

something" I said fiercely, frustrated at them both.

"That's what I came here for actually. I thought maybe the two of us could come up with something"

I looked between them for what must have been the hundredth time this evening.

John didn't seem interested in moving, not even for a respite from his admirers, and even while dancing Celia hadn't come an inch closer to him from her place near the stairs.

They may have been in the same room but they way they acted there might as well have been a gaping chasm across the floor.

What could we possibly do?

"We could... lock them in the courtyard?" I suggested half heartedly.

Mira stifled a laugh and shook her head.

"After the fight they had out there that doesn't seem like such a good idea."

"But it's the only continuous thing they've had this ball, going out to the courtyard..."

"There must be something else..."

The realization seemed to hit us at the same time and our words came out together.

"The last dance."

It could be perfect, if we could find some way of executing it. After all, the realm's Prince couldn't sit out the last dance

no matter what his personal problems, and I'll be damned if I let him share it with one of those girls.

One in particular seemed especially determined to be asked, the girl in the slinky black dress who wouldn't stop laughing.

I felt disgusted on Celia's behalf when I saw her arm on his sleeve. This needed fixing and fast.

"Go ask him to dance" I blurted out.

Her eyes widened and she looked warily at the mob.

"And then what? The ball doesn't end for another half hour at least."

"I guess just... keep him busy until then."

"That's hardly a foolproof plan David."

I couldn't help but smile at her exasperated expression. "I know, but it's the best I've got. Just make sure he's at the center of the ballroom when it's time for the last dance. Drag him if you have to, just make sure he's there."

She sighed heavily and nodded.

"This is all for you Cee" She mumbled before pushing her way into the crowd.

Celia's POV

I could feel his eyes on me, following me across the dance floor.

I refused to look up again.

One glance was enough and even that had been a mistake. He was talking to someone else, that girl who'd been so rude to me the day of presentation.

It hurt me more than I was willing to admit; was I so easily replaceable?

I hadn't talked to anyone, not that I'd had the chance with the way Mason, Luke and David had been trading me between them all night.

Not that I minded.

I doubt I could have handled small talk with a hoard of arrogant Lords.

They all stood at the edges of the dance floor, predators ready to leap. Luckily for me, none of them dared approach the Prince's own squire or best friends.

I told myself John didn't have a choice; that as Prince he had to talk to them or at least be polite, but that didn't stop me from being jealous every time her laugh pierced the air.

John's POV

I was getting a headache.

The moment my concentration faltered, or my eyes drifted back to Cece she'd erupt in laughter.

Just

exactly was so funny?

Like yesterday she was going on and on about something while I drifted in and out, never really paying attention.

I suppose I should at least be grateful she was content with a one sided conversation. All I had to do was nod occasionally, which suited me just fine.

I felt my gaze being drawn back to Celia like a magnetic pull. She seemed bent on ignoring me and I couldn't exactly blame her. I tried not to be bothered by her dancing with my friends since I knew the alternative would be the Lords, and that would have been unbearable.

I fought my reflex to wince as Petunia's laugh filled the air.

seemed bent on making me deaf.

I turned my glance back to her hastily, and tried not to curl my lips in disgust at her outfit, which was even worse than yesterday.

What could posses you to wear something so distasteful?

She didn't seem the slightest bit ashamed of it either.

I couldn't help but compare her to Celia. The two girls couldn't be more different. Petunia dressed far too tightly and provocatively than could ever be appropriate. Not my type at all, whereas without even trying Celia out-classed this girl and all the rest.

How could I have been such a fool?

At this point I even wished another of the girls in the crowd would try striking up a conversation.

It was getting downright embarrassing talking to Petunia with all the disapproving stares we were getting. Her choice in fashion seemed to be raising a lot more eyebrows than Celia's men's clothes ever did.

I nearly jumped when she placed her hand on my arm and then got annoyed at her presumption.

This was really getting out of hand.

A familiar figure made their way through the crowd and I nearly shouted with relief.

"Mira!"

I didn't know Cece's friends as well as she knew mine but I'd never been happier to see one of them in my life.

"Nice to see you too John" She laughed, not missing the reason for my enthusiasm.

"Of course it is" I joked, knowing Petunia was fuming beside me.

Mira rolled her eyes, reminding me so much of Celia my smile faded instantly.

Sympathy flashed though her eyes and she smiled slightly. "Dance with me?"

I eagerly took her hand, glad for the first time tonight at the chance to get away from Lady Petunia.

Celia's POV

"Come on Cee, next one's mine."

I turned to David, resigned for the next few dances. I'd already asked repeatedly if I could just slip out of the dance, really who would even notice?

If they would let me out of their sights for just one minute I would leave anyway, but the black dress was no help among

a sea of color.

At least the dancing was better than the talking. The boys always led so all I had to do was let them.

I still felt half in a dream, not wanting to believe what had happened last night could be real. But here we were; another night of the ball as if nothing had changed.

On the bright side at least John wasn't talking to that other girl anymore.

In fact, with all the moving bodies around us I'd lost sight of him completely, which was as much of a relief as a blessing.

Before I knew it two songs had ended and I was being pulled along somewhere by David.

If I'd been paying attention I could have stopped him, but as it was we were already half way across the dance floor when I noticed what was going on.

My sudden stop caused him to jerk back since he had a tight grip around my forearm.

"Where are we going?"

I didn't want to get any closer to the throne dais than I had to. Just being in the same room and having to act like strangers was painful enough.

"Nowhere, we're already here" He said with quick grin.

I frowned wondering why he would want to come to the middle of the dance floor but was relieved not to have to go any further.

My relief was short lived though, as Mira and John burst through the crowd in front of us.

I immediately tried moving back before they saw me but was restrained by David.

This was not good.

Not good.

I couldn't face him.

Didn't they know that?

Too late, they'd seen us.

I looked quickly away, my face probably wearing the same panicked expression he had.

I shot a scathing look at David and Mira for setting this up. They both just shrugged apologetically.

We stood facing each other for I don't know how long. I hated it, just standing here.

"Lady Celia" He murmured quietly.

I felt my stomach drop two feet. Since when was he so formal?

It was a sure indication of just how bad things were between us.

Without quite registering my movements, I found myself curtsying.

"My Prince" I said stiffly.

John's POV

I must be dreaming.

I hoped I was... but not even in my dreams would I ever have thought Celia would curtsy to me.

Never, in all the years I'd known her had she treated me like a Prince... never until today.

I used to tease her about it, saying she would one day, but now... I didn't want her to, not like this.

It was all just such a mess.

And once again, I'd started it, by calling her Lady Celia. What was I thinking?

Like always when I'm around her, I wasn't.

Still, I was glad just to be standing close to her, already it seemed like I hadn't seen her in forever.

Naturally beautiful.

Why had it taken so long for me to see it?

Maybe then we would have had time and--

No, I couldn't think like that anymore, it would only make tomorrow harder.

I'd choose her over anyone.

But it's too late now, I've lost her.

Celia's POV

He was only standing a few feet away and still I missed him like crazy.

Neither of us could even look at the other.

A deep bass resonated throughout the hall, a single note hanging in the air.

The tension hung in the air between us like something tangible.

I tried not to look in his eyes, though his features still copied my own; bewildered and hurt.

I shot a look of annoyance at David and Mira, hovering around us with determined looks on their faces.

How was this supposed to solve anything?

Soft and slow, a violin started playing, accompanied by the bell like thrum of a dozen harps plucked at once.

So this is what they'd set us up for.

The sea of faces moved as one, partners coming together, hands raised and joined.

With one last quivering sigh of noise, the note melted into a resonant beat, deep and evocative, with a bittersweet intensity.

The couples around us began moving, picking up their pace until they seemed like nothing more than blurs spinning around us while we stood frozen in place.

The last dance of the night had begun.

****

[A/N] For an idea of the song type in this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ezX_uTz_qA

I couldn't find a proper fully instrumental version so ignore the backup vocals.

****

John's POV

From the whirl of colors around us a hand reached out, either Mira or David, and pushed Celia towards me.

My hands automatically reached out to steady her.

She quickly regained her balance, and took a hesitant step back, but I didn't let go.

I couldn't have if I'd wanted to, and I really didn't want to.

I kept one hand around her waist and moved the other to take hold of one of hers.

Still trying not to look up she raised her free hand to my shoulder.

It was all so familiar, and yet for the first time, everything felt wrong, and off, and most of all awkward.

There was too much space between us; our hands hung loosely together, barely touching.

I started pulling her along, moving slowly at first, and then faster, matching the pace of those around us.

Gradually, so subtly I hardly noticed, we moved closer together, our grips tightening and I couldn't look away from her.

As if feeling my eyes on her, she looked up.

Celia's POV

Immediately our gazes locked, and then I couldn't look away.

A harp plucked rapidly played in the distance, and around us the frenzied twirling seemed to slow down as the whole room seemed to freeze.

They were nothing but statues to my mind, completely insignificant as we entered a world of our own, where only the two of us existed.

We weaved between them, the only ones in the room, faster and faster, turning the statues into a rainbow swirl.

There was nothing else but the pulsing beat around us, no one else who could come between us.

The room came back into sharp focus. The couples began slowing down around us for real and we slowed down to match them.

We stayed together longer than the rest before finally breaking apart and stepped hastily away, all the awkwardness returning in a sudden overwhelming rush.

Neither of us seemed able to look away, and I at least wanted to memorize everything about him for the last time.

In sync as always, we looked away at the same time, breaking the spell that had held us in place. I looked back one last time, but he was already gone.

****

Whoa guys, just one more chapter and the epilogue left, I can hardly believe it.

Soundtrack:

Joshua Radin - Only You

Dashboard Confessional - Stolen

Michelle Williams - Last Dance

Rascal Flatts - What Hurts the Most

Roxette - Fading like a Flower

The Last Dance (34)

Here it is at last, the one you've all been waiting for, and I'm sorry to have kept you waiting for so long. This hasn't been edited yet so sorry if there are a lot of mistakes. Just the epilogue left and I have an awesome music video I'm making for it as a Grande finale to the book.

Thanks to all my fans and especially those who've been with me since the beginning and kept me going.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Chapter 34 - Second Chances

{The High Ball, Day 5}

Celia's POV

"I can't go"

I knew immediately from their stares they understood what I was talking about, but felt the need to say it again anyway.

"I can't go to the dance."

I tossed the dress aside, hardly even able to look at it. There was no way I could go.

Not today.

No one said a word to convince me otherwise and I was grateful for that, since my control over breaking down was tenuous at best.

Even without going I could picture the dance, over and over in my head like a nightmare. Behind my eyes the once swirling couples moved with exaggerated slowness to a sombre marriage march, as if mocking me.

From every corner, leering faces gloated behind dark masks; stared with laughing eyes; shook their heads in pity...

And yet those thoughts were nothing compared to the searing image of John etched in my mind the way I pictured him to be; standing tall for the audience, head bent to the floor, eyes averted.

From me.

It would be far too painful seeing him again and knowing there could only be one way this day could end.

With him picking a bride.

One who wasn't me.

And there was no way I could be around when that happened. I wanted to be a hundred miles away, gone to the farthest reaches of our Kingdom, and still it wouldn't be far enough. I'd never be able to escape it.

At least, for a little while I'd be spared knowing the identity of my replacement. I was sure I would hate her no matter who she was just for the fact that she could have him when I couldn't.

Lily and Mira continued moving around the room adjusting clothes, and trying on jewellery.

I tried not to be envious of the fact that just a few nights ago that had been me... until everything went so badly wrong.

Seeing them go through the motions of getting ready I felt oddly detached. After the anger, sadness and hopelessness I'd somehow moved on to numb.

It felt as though I was sitting outside a window, watching everything happen around me as just an observer.

It felt like the first two nights of the ball, so perfect had been only a dream, and the second two, completely the opposite, a nightmare. Either way, none of it had seemed real, not until tonight.

There was nothing dreamlike about what was happening tonight.

Lily headed towards the door, glancing back once with a worried look on her face. I arranged my face into a smile that didn't feel natural and kept it in place until she stepped out the door.

Mira was next, pausing at the doorway as if to say something.

Knowing her the way I did, I could almost see her thoughts forming, and then being tossed aside as she changed her mind about asking.

"What will you do now?"

Good question. What

I do now, now that I couldn't have him, now that we weren't even friends anymore?

I didn't have any answers, but I knew that wasn't what she was asking, even if the implication was there.

"I'll just... stay here."

It seemed as good a plan as any since there was nowhere in the castle or town I could escape notice or talk of the ball.

She nodded once, the same worried look Lily had worn mirrored on her face.

I tried another reassuring smile until she left the room again.

I felt guilty for making them worry, especially since I felt bad enough for all of us combined.

Besides, they knew me well enough to know I would be fine, just fine.

I always was.

At least, I hope so.

Petunia's POV

I twirled around once more, admiring the effect of the scarlet dress as it whirled around my feet.

Now this, this was a dress that simply begged to be noticed.

I was a little disappointed by the higher neckline of the dress and the more modest fit, but the paneled skirt had a long slit up the side that my legs peeked out of when I walked for a touch of appeal.

Actually, the more I thought about it, the better this was; I could go for the more demure innocent look that Johnathan seemed to like so much in that excuse for a Lady.

I took a deep breath and let it out again slowly.

Yesterday hadn't gone quite as planned but today would, it had too. I didn't doubt my ability to snatch the Prince up for myself, but that girl and her friends had gotten in my way one too many times.

Maybe I'd underestimated her appeal just a tad, but I wouldn't be making that mistake again.

Obviously I'd been using the wrong technique to win him over. While the girl didn't match me in looks she still had a certain charm, but there was one thing I had that she most certainly did not.

I had the training to be a Queen.

While she must have spent her childhood waving around a ridiculous stick I was learning how to be the Lady of a realm; someone fit to be the wife of a Prince.

All I had to do was make him realize how much he needed me and it would be all over for the Lady Knight.

I picked up a jewelled handbag from my dresser and slipped the thin gold crown into it, for hope, for luck, for whatever it might inspire, and smiled to myself.

By the end of the night, he would be mine, just like it was obviously meant to be.

John's POV

She wasn't here. Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me, especially considering what was happening tonight, but still...

I hated this. Why did it always have to be so complicated?

I slumped lower in my seat, not even worried about what everyone would think anymore. At least they had gotten the hint to leave me alone. That was one thing to be grateful for.

Perhaps the only thing.

The ballroom seemed especially crowded tonight, presumably because it was the last, so maybe I just hadn't seen her.

It seemed unlikely though since I knew deep down she wouldn't be coming.

Oddly, it didn't make the announcement I'd have to make tonight any easier. If anything it was worse because now it felt like I was going through with this behind her back.

A commotion at the door caught my attention, and I turned my eyes towards the foot of the stairs, grateful for anything that might prove a distraction.

A tall girl in a deep scarlet dress stepped into the hall and for a moment I felt like I had stepped back in time to the night Annabelle had been presented; the first and last time I had attended the High Ball with Celia before this year.

It brought back dozens of memories of that night, none of them good. I had to wonder, if I knew then how I would feel about her now, would I have acted differently? Would it have made a difference?

That night changed everything.

It was the night Cece decided to be a Lady Knight; it was when our routine teasing had turned into a powerful enmity...

There were definitely things I wish I could change about that night, even all these years later. If only I'd been a gentlemen like my father told me and said she looked nice...

The too-big dress actually

looked cute on her, and maybe if I'd said that instead I wouldn't be in this position today.

The girl in red had moved away from the door, smiling around at people and chatting as she went. They seemed to like her well enough and for a moment I found myself curious, until she turned around and I caught sight of her face.

I could feel my mouth drop open in shock; it was Lady Petunia.

I barely recognized her as the girl who'd harassed me so much the last two nights; she was completely transformed.

Although her appearance was significantly altered in a simple dress, it was her sudden change in attitude that surprised me most. Whereas before she'd passed other guests by as if they were beneath her, now she seemed determined to meet them all.

While something still seemed insincere about her, I couldn't help but feel inclined to be polite when she made her way over.

She curtsied quickly and looked up at me with a small smile.

"Prince Johnathan" She murmured.

"Lady Petunia?"

She blushed slightly "I... came to apologize; I realize I may have come on a little strong the last few nights."

"That's... quite all right" I said with a nod.

Mason's POV

This was not good.

I looked over at John talking to that Lady Petunia who'd been on his heels the last two nights.

She seemed normal for once, and even more shocking was that they seemed to be getting along.

I didn't trust her.

No one could just change like that overnight.

But even in the little time I'd known the Prince it was obvious he was trying to distract himself from thinking of Celia.

This may have been easier for him since she was evidently not here. I looked around the room hoping to find her but after the first few times I knew it was pointless.

Not that I could blame the girl, she hadn't wanted to attend in the first place, and now, after all that had happened... well, it was a wonder she'd even come last night.

My thoughts turned back to the same ones I'd been having since yesterday.

There had to be some way to fix this. Anyone, even a near stranger like myself, could see they were crazy about each other, perfect for each other... they just needed time to see it for themselves.

And that was the key of course.

They needed more

.

Only how could I give it to them? Only once person could, and he seemed even more oblivious than his son about what had been going on the last few days.

I looked over at the King and Queen, sharing a dance off to the side of the dance floor. Having what they did it seemed impossible that they could accept anything less for their son. There had to be something I could do.

I waited until the dance was over and quickly made my way over, bowing when I faced the King. Though I didn't know him as well as John's other friends, I

the only one to overhear his last confrontation with this man.

"Squire Mason, what a pleasant surprise."

"Hello Sire, I was wondering if... I could have a word alone?"

His brow crinkled in confusion but he nodded all the same and I followed him out of the ballroom towards a chamber off to the right.

I wrung my hands together, wondering how to say this, but when he turned to face me, the words blurted out on their own.

"You can't do this to him."

"Do what to whom?" He asked curiously.

"John. You can't force this marriage on him."

The Kings face lit in understanding, and immediately became troubled.

"I know this isn't easy on him but--"

"Isn't easy? This can't go on; can't you see what it's doing to him?"

"I've hardly even seen him the last few nights, he keeps disappearing off somewhere or another" He said with a frown.

I shook my head, half smiling and half grimacing at the memories of the last four nights.

"The Ball this year has probably been the best and worst days of his life." And I would know, I'd been a few steps behind him nearly all the time.

The King brought his fingers to his eyes as if hoping this problem could go away.

Well, that's what I wanted too.

"Johnathan hasn't mentioned any of this to me."

"Well of course not, he needs her to accept on her own terms."

"Her?" His eyebrows knit together in confusion "I'm afraid you've lost me Squire."

"Celia, he's in love with Celia."

I waited impatiently for the shock to pass over him and couldn't help feeling slightly annoyed that John's own father couldn't see what everyone else in his Kingdom had managed to figure out.

"Johnathan...

son... is in

?" He asked in wonder.

I nodded tersely, knowing any second John could do something to make all this effort go to waste.

He was desperate by this point, he must have been to be tolerating Lady Petunia's presence, and desperate men did stupid things.

His face broke into a huge grin. "Well, that's wonderful, I told him all along to snap her up. What's the problem then?"

I looked at him in exasperation. I'd only known Celia for a week and even I could have anticipated her response.

"The problem is its John and Celia" I said simply, as if that explained everything, and judging by his expression it did.

"And what do you propose we do?" He said with a slight smile, as if waiting for his own idea to be confirmed.

"Call the council here, convince them. It's really just postponing the inevitable."

Without any hesitation he called to the doorman, who entered with a deep bow.

"My Lord?"

"Send a message for the council members to meet in the throne room immediately, and tell Sir Dimitri to join me here."

With another bow he was gone.

I shifted restlessly from foot to foot, anxious for a decision to be made.

The King turned back to me with a wry smile.

"Go find John and tell him the good news."

I felt my eyebrows rise in surprise. "But Sire, you haven't even met with the council yet."

He winked conspiratorially. "As you said, I'll convince them, my boy's in

"

With a surge of relief I ran out of the room and turned my steps to the ballroom. I couldn't wait to see John's reaction.

John's POV

I couldn't help but be interested in what Petunia was saying. The way she talked about her Fief, it was amazing what she knew.

I always knew we had a great number of commoners at the Ball, farmers and merchants, tradeswomen and housewives,

but it never occurred to me that the owners of the lands would be so involved in the running of their fiefs.

Clearly I'd misjudged a great deal of people over the past few years. They certainly knew more about their lands than I knew about our Kingdom.

"John!"

I looked around in surprise, not having noticed Mason come up to me. I looked at him curiously, wondering why he looked so out of breath, as if he'd run all the way here from across the room.

"Something wrong Mase?"

His face broke into a wide grin. "Actually, something's

for a change."

I couldn't help a bemused smile in return at his good mood. "What is it?"

He opened his mouth to say something, and I could tell he was bursting to tell me, but his eyes shot to Petunia first and he hesitated.

I glanced at her quickly and noticed she had her eyes fixed across the room, but it was obvious she was still listening intently.

Shifting slightly in my seat to block us from view I nodded at him to continue.

"You're off the hook!"

His voice was lowered but still came out louder than he probably meant, but I still didn't understand what was going

on.

"What hook? Have you been in the champagne Squire?" I joked.

He only looked exasperated and rolled his eyes.

"The marriage deadline John. It's off."

"It's... no way" I breathed.

I could barely process his words even though the meaning was obvious. It was off. This was too good to be true.

Where was the catch?

How did this even happen?

Belatedly I realized Mason was laughing at my expression.

"Well, what are you still doing here? Go

her."

I jumped up from my seat without any hesitation causing a startled gasp from Petunia. I'd already forgotten she was there.

I was already half way down the throne dais when she called out my name, and with extreme impatience I turned back around.

She slipped her hand inside a handbag and brought it back out with my crown. I felt my eyes widening in surprise. Where had she even gotten that?

"Umm, thank you" I put my hand out to take it, but she held back.

"Wait, can't you see!" She said, her voice rising slightly in hysteria.

"We're meant to be, this Kingdom

me, what could you possibly want with her!?" She finished, her voice rising in a near yell.

I glanced around and, as I'd feared, saw a lot of people looking this way.

Great, a scene. Just what I needed.

"Look, I'm really sorry" I whispered quietly, "But she's everything to me, and this Kingdom, this crown..." I said, taking it gently from her fingers "...means nothing to me without her."

With another quick apology I turned around and left, and though I was genuinely sorry for leaving her so upset, there was someone I needed to see.

Everything that had happened before this moment didn't even matter anymore.

I was getting a second chance.

were getting a second chance, and nothing could stand in the way of that anymore.

I ran out into the hallway, heading directly for her room, it seemed the obvious place to look.

It was only when I stood outside that the nervousness started.

What would I even say?

I shifted from foot to foot and ran a hand though my hair, immediately trying to pat it back down into order. I'd started straightening out my clothes when I realized how stupid I was being.

I knocked once... then twice... and still no answer.

"Celia?"

I tried the doorknob and slowly opened the door, more nervous now than I'd even been with her.

"Celia?"

The room was empty and I couldn't help the wash of disappointment that came over me.

Where could she be?

Celia's POV

I walked along the castle wall unsure of where to go. After only minutes my room had felt like a prison and I'd had to get out, only now... I had nowhere to go.

The inside of the castle was out of the question, and all my usual places reminded me of John.

Realizing I was about to round the corner to the back of the castle, I turned my steps away and found myself walking towards the stables.

If only it could be as easy as jumping on my horse and leaving all these problems in the dust.

If only.

The stable was unusually quiet when I entered, but comforting all the same. I made my way over to Coriolis, who swished her tail in greeting, and buried my face in her mane.

Without thinking my feet carried me to side where her saddle hung. It still smelled like the forest and suddenly I was overwhelmed with the memories of those weeks.

If only we could have held onto them for a little while longer...

A loud banging at the door startled me out of my trance, along with waking up some of the sleeping horses and causing a snort from Cori, but I barely noticed as John rushed inside, more recognizable by his mess of molten gold hair than the crown that was precariously on top.

He stared at me with bright eyes looking flushed and dishevelled and radiating a level of elation I could hardly process.

It took a moment for him to notice my hand on Coriolis, all saddled up and ready to go, though I didn't even remember doing it.

His expression faltered, to be quickly replaced with panic.

"Are you... leaving?"

A slight hitch in his voice betrayed how upset he was by this idea.

I felt my gaze softening immediately. "I could never leave John."

The words were out of my mouth before they could even be registered, but I knew they were true. If I'd had any ideas of not coming back, any doubts, they had fled instantly at the suggestion that he could be hurt by it.

The relief on his face was obvious, and despite the turmoil I'd felt earlier, I couldn't help a faint smile.

We stood there awkwardly facing each other, a state we'd grown all too familiar with these last few days.

It occurred to me that our meeting in the stables was too much of a coincidence. My eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion.

"Wait... are

leaving?"

He smiled ruefully and shook his head.

"Not this time... I'd be leaving too much behind."

I stared at him sceptically. This actually seemed like the right time for him to be running away.

"Like what?"

He took a step closer and stopped again.

"Well you for one and... well, just you" He mumbled, blushing slightly.

Again I found myself smiling, absurdly flattered, and took a few hesitant steps forward.

"Why are you here then?" I asked softly.

He shifted from foot to foot, not able to look me in the eyes as his face became serious and slightly pained.

"I just came to tell you... to ask... I mean..." He blew out a breath, running his hand absently through his hair as he struggled to find the right words.

Abruptly he turned to face me, only to drop his gaze to the floor.

"I love you."

The words, a whisper, resonated through my mind like a gale wind.

I felt my eyes widening, my whole body trembling in shock, and for a moment seemed to forget how to breathe.

Three words and they filled me with a kind of light that was at once wonderful and frightening; it scared me that he could feel that way and was even scarier to know I felt the same way back.

It seemed too good to be true, like this could only be a dream. But I knew it was real, could feel it so strongly I thought I would burst.

He glanced up for only a second to see my reaction and held up a hand when I opened my mouth to reply.

"You don't have to say anything... I just wanted to know... if maybe... I mean someday... do you think... could you ever love me?"

His words came out in a rush, filled with an uncertainty and vulnerability that I'd never seen in him before.

"I already do John" I whispered, blinking back tears of sheer delight.

"Please Cece, just give us a chance--wait... did you say..."

His jaw dropped open in shock as my words registered, his expression slowly changing from wonder to glee.

And then he was walking forward so fast the distance between us melted away.

His arms came around my waist and I felt myself being lifted up off the ground.

The room became a blur as he started spinning us around.

I felt myself laughing as I quickly threw my arms around his neck, even though I knew he would never let me fall.

It could have been seconds or hours before he put me down again and I never would have known. I refused to let go of him, still half worried this might all be some kind of dream.

But of course, I knew it could only be reality when my mind finally calmed down enough for rational thought to kick in.

Tonight was the last night of the ball.

His deadline.

I slackened my grip around his neck enough to lean back and see his face.

He was still grinning widely, completely at peace, obviously having forgotten everything before having come into the stable.

"John... what about..."

I hated putting the question into words, ruining the perfect moment we'd been having, but he seemed to understand where my thoughts were going.

"I don't have to. Not tonight at least."

He laughed at my shocked expression and pulled me into him once more, burying his face in my hair.

"I have all the time you need to convince you that being Queen won't be so bad. And if you think I'm ever taking no for an answer, well you're stuck with me anyway."

I laughed, letting myself relax fully into his embrace for the first time.

"I wouldn't have it any other way John."

****

Soundtrack:

Retrace - Anberlin

Truly Madly Deeply - Savage Garden

How can I not Love You- Joy Enriquez

Hey You - Jonas Brothers

The Last Dance (Epilogue)

So here it is, the last little bit of the last dance. Can you believe it's over? It's been a great ride that's for sure. So as for all those questions, I definitely hope to write another story but it might be a while, I need to catch up with school and if I start I want to be able to update more regularly. As for a sequel, it might happen BUT John and Celia would be more of background characters.

PS: So there were some issues with the video and I couldn't get it to work with audio, sooo the song that goes with it is Hey Juliet by LMNT so for the full effect you must play the song exactly four seconds into the video becasue the timing is everything and I'm really sad it's having all these issues. Still, hope you enjoy it anyway =)

Anyway it's the last one, so please comment and vote alright?

Cheers,

xo.

****

Epilogue

8 months later

Celia's POV

High block!

CRACK

Swing!

Left block!

THWACK

I walked down the ranks, correcting stances, fixing foot positions, just like I had a million times before, but this was different.

This was my very own class.

After months of building and planning and sending out messengers, it was finally happening. A girl's school for knight training.

And all in time for the start of the New Year.

I held my cloak tighter around me, wishing I had a sword in my own hand to beat back the cold.

We'd only been working together for a few weeks, but already I could see the difference. Noble girls who'd never held so much as a stick weapon before could swing practice swords with confidence. Village girls who may have had no other prospects now had a chance to make something with their lives.

Knowing I was a part of that was unlike any feeling I'd ever known before.

Being in charge of all these girls, knowing I was part of their lives, made me realize a little bit what John went through every day as Prince. Granted, it was on a smaller scale, but at least now I had an idea of the joy, the feeling, even the pressure, of shaping so many lives.

I turned myself around in the middle of the circle, marvelling at the two rows that faced each other, smacking sticks in almost perfect unison.

The sound, I knew, resounding throughout the grounds.

It seemed to shake the very foundation of the castle letting everyone know we were a force all our own.

I smiled out, closing my eyes as the last clang echoed into the crisp January breeze, and dozens of flushed faces turned my way.

"Excellent, now who will volunteer to help me demonstrate a combat routine?"

I looked around to see many eyes quickly look away, afraid to be put on the spot.

"I'll do it"

I whipped around at the sound of the voice, whispers immediately breaking out around me as the circle parted open to reveal a smirking face.

Straight away my heart rate picked up, like it seemed to be doing more and more often when I saw him, and I couldn't help thinking the same word in my head; mine, mine, mine.

With each step closer, his smirk seemed to widen, as if he could hear my thoughts out loud.

Lousy arrogant Prince.

He'd only gotten worse knowing I actually cared about him.

"This is a closed practice John" I said, trying for seriousness.

He raised an eyebrow "Is that so? Since when?"

With a casual glance around the crowd he held out a hand, and was immediately offered a dozen practice swords.

"Since now."

He ignored my words, taking his time to pick a sword before turning towards me and crouching slightly into a defence position.

I had no choice but to mirror his actions.

"Now now Cece, play nice" He said in a low teasing voice.

With a step forward our weapons rose to meet each other with a satisfying crack.

"And why should I?"

His smug look was instantaneous as we weaved in and out of a routine so practiced it flowed like water from one move to the next.

He darted in for the next attack, bringing his lips close to my ear quick as a breath. "Because you love me."

I could feel the scowl on my face even as my cheeks filled with colour.

He never missed an opportunity to use that against me.

Stupid Prince.

It's not like I could deny it, or even make up a good comeback, as he well knew.

I couldn't even be angry with him for it, not really.

With a step forward I dropped my sword in a low arc, not quite managing to catch him off guard as I broke out of our routine.

His face broke into a grin as he sliced up and back around, easily taking my lead, and from the class I heard a cheer go up at our now unplanned fight.

Though our moves were uncoordinated, they still moved with an easy grace; we knew each others' fighting styles too well for this to be any sort of competition.

Our pace increased, until all that could be seen was a blur of swords between us while we whirled in and out of each move.

Faster and faster, there was no time to calculate each swing, we parried and blocked on instinct, dipped and twirled, stepped backwards and forwards in perfect time, a dance all its own.

I knew the smile on my face matched his own, one of amusement at how far we'd come, accomplishment at what we'd achieved... this class was our first great victory together, and every day was a constant reminder of that.

With the blink of an eye, or rather a wink, it was over.

His sword dropped to the ground, and he faced the cheering crowd with an easy shrug.

I noticed we'd gathered quite an audience from the surrounding practice fields and half smiled at how easily John could throw the match.

"Some things never change" I teased, energized in a way only practicing could make me.

He turned back with a lopsided grin.

"But I didn't lose."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "The sword on the ground says otherwise" I smirked, knowing the drop had been on purpose.

He grinned and took a step forward to pick up the sword, tossing it carelessly back to the student who'd given it to him.

"There's more than one way to win."

I gave him a baffled look. "What do you mean...?"

He flashed a smile and I saw a wicked glint in his eyes before I realized what was going on and took a hasty step back, but it was too slow.

He'd taken the step before me and had his arm wrapped around my waist before I could blink.

"Don't you dare John" I said with a glance around at our audience.

I struggled pointlessly while he made a big show of looking innocently around, clearly enjoying this and waiting for my face to be completely red before bringing his lips down to brush lightly against mine, trying, I knew, to tease a reaction out of me.

A few months ago, I might have gotten annoyed, but the damage was already done and lately, it had gotten harder and harder to pull away.

He was magnetic.

I gently pulled him closer, surprising him, and kissed him fully in front of everyone.

Our audience erupted in giggles, whistles and cheers, but I could only be mortified for a second as he smiled and brought his other arm around me.

The warmth spread through me like a bolt of thunder, so spontaneous and powerful it was overwhelming.

And just like that I forgot about the people around us, melting into him.

Now that I'd stopped being afraid of how I felt for him it was so easy to be blissfully in love, and it never ceased to amaze me that every kiss felt this way; like it was the first, the best, the most perfect.

And more and more each day I'd come to realize I couldn't do without him.

***

I ducked behind a wall column and crouched down, waiting for the steps down the hall to fade before peaking around the corner.

All clear.

Getting up, I quickly made my way down the hall and headed towards the ballroom, looking both ways before slipping inside.

So many months after the High Ball it was just the way I liked it, dimly lit and dusty.

Still flushed from the cold, dozens of guests bustled around the room trying to warm up, hanging decorations and throwing out pillows as they moved.

A small section of the ballroom had been enclosed with thick gauzy drapes hanging across the walls with smaller drapes criss-crossing along the top to make a sort of giant indoor tent. Two tables were set opposite from the entrance and were nearly sagging with delicious smelling foods and drinks.

I surveyed the tent, checking that all the guests were here, and that everything was in place before noticing the centerpiece of our tent was still missing.

"Don't worry Cee, we've got it"

I whirled around and let out a sigh of relief as Luke, David and Mason struggled to drag a giant pot, filled to the brim with fire wood, into the hall, and let out a laugh at the sight of them.

"If you think it's so funny why don't you try?" David said with scowl.

"Yeah, we've had to drag this thing in from all the way across the castle!" Luke added.

"Not to

keeping it out of sight. Have you any idea how difficult it was to conceal this monstrosity?" Mason said indignantly.

I held back another laugh and smiled. "Well, I knew you strong boys could handle it" I said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Several of the girls around the room turned in their direction, and suddenly their scowls were replaced with easy smiles and puffed out chests as they dragged it to the middle of the tent as if it weighed nothing at all.

Boys.

Pulling out three sets of flint the boys set to work, and after a few moments a hundred sparks shot up from the pot and a steady blaze began to crackle.

Immediately everyone in the room swarmed towards the fire, reaching out to warm their hands and faces while the boys stood proudly by the side, waiting to accept their praises.

I shook my head and took one more look around.

Perfect.

Now all that was missing was the guest of honour.

My eyes met with Mason, and with a nod he slipped back out of the ballroom.

As if an unspoken signal had been called, everyone quieted down and the candles around the ballroom were put out so that the only light came from our large pot of fire. The light reflected off our gauzy drapes, making the whole tent seem to glow like a burning coal, and if you shut your eyes, it almost felt like the forest.

In the sudden quiet, the laughter from down the hall seemed twice as loud.

The door creaked open and...

"SURPRISE!"

John was standing in the doorway, completely dumbfounded while Mason slapped his shoulder and some of the other guests started laughing and cheering. I couldn't help a small smile of satisfaction that everything had remained a secret.

And it had definitely not been an easy one to keep. With all the preparation this week and all the supplies moving into the room all day it was a wonder he hadn't found out.

After the shock had worn off his eyes sought mine out immediately, and he moved to the back of the tent, accepting 'happy birthday's' along the way.

"Did you do all this?" He asked in wonder.

I smirked at him "Like it?"

"Well, it definitely tops crashing your party" He mumbled.

I only had time to grin before his friends walked up and started pulling him towards the center of the tent.

As if on reflex, his hand shot out to grab mine and pull me along behind him. I rolled my eyes but let myself be led to the center where everyone had gathered and started settling down in a circle around the fire.

We took our places and I looped my arm through his, leaning against his side without being conscious of the people around us, all close friends anyway.

Alone or in small groups, people got up, telling stories, putting on short plays or recounting old memories.

It felt like a family as we all laughed together over embarrassing moments and adventures in and out of the castle, making up tales and reminiscing old memories.

With the steady glow of the fire it was impossible to tell how much time had gone by, and honestly I would have been happy to stay there forever.

Finally the smells of food overwhelmed us and we rushed towards the tables, making toasts and cheers for anything from the New Year and the training school to the warm fire and the last few days until snowfall before breaking into smaller groups to talk.

I left John to properly greet all his friends and moved to a corner of the tent before sinking into one of the mounds of fluffy pillows.

If only all days could be as perfect as this.

But then again, with John, most of them were.

If felt silly to think the thought in my head, even sillier to feel the giddy smile on my face that never seemed to stay away for long, but I couldn't deny that it was true.

I tipped back my glass of warm apple cider and finally found the strength to get up. Starting to feel too warm I slipped out of our makeshift tent and went around the ballroom towards the courtyard.

The icy breeze felt soothing against my hot skin, and I stood for a moment in the doorway before making my way down the pathway.

I flopped down on the bench and closed my eyes, letting the sounds from inside fill my ears while I tried to commit

everything to memory.

The door clicked shut, taking with it the sounds that had carried out from our indoor tent.

I heard him approaching from the crunching of frost that accompanied each step.

Moments later he'd taken the seat beside me, an easy smile on his face, full of self assurance and ease.

It was remarkable what saying I love you to someone could do. Without all the doubts and confusion he was a whole new person, and the same was true for me.

Finally, after months, there was a comfort between us that had never existed before.

"Thanks for all this Cece" He said, nodding back towards the party.

I turned to him with a smile and reached out to take his hand in mine, loving that the action could feel so natural.

"Happy Birthday John."

He leaned in... and blew strands of hair out of my face.

I laughed and rolled my eyes while he looped an arm around my waist and pulled me tightly to his side.

"So, what did you get me?"

"What? A party isn't enough?"

"It's a start" He said smirking.

I smiled faintly. "Well, I had something in mind... but it's more of what you can give me."

His expression turned baffled and slightly amused while he twirled a curl of my hair around his fingers.

"I think you've missed the concept of 'birthday' Cece" He said with a light chuckle.

"Stop being difficult John, before I change my mind."

He shook his head, now more amused than ever.

"Alright, let's hear it, what can I do for you on

birthday?"

"You can tell me..." I could feel myself blushing now and averted my eyes slightly "...if that offer you made at the High Ball is still valid" I blurted out quickly.

I risked a glance back to see that he looked confused and couldn't help but feel slightly exasperated, only John wouldn't get it.

"What off--"

I saw the exact moment realization hit his eyes, and his jaw dropped a second later.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment, like the castle could have come toppling down around us and he wouldn't even notice.

Then he was fumbling around inside a pocket and it was my turn to be speechless as his hand came out holding a velvet black box.

"Yes" He said breathlessly "The offer still stands."

Time seemed to slow down as his hands gently pried open the box, and even knowing what was in there, I couldn't help but gasp at the sight.

The ring was a glittering silver tinted just slightly red, making it look like it came fresh from a forge, glowing with the heat of coals.

The band itself looked to be made of two vines woven and braided together, laced with tiny leaves carved in such detail they could be real; all leading to a delicate silvery red blossom studded in the center with a tiny sparkling diamond.

I was almost too overwhelmed to speak, and it took a few tries before I was able to get any words past my lips.

"Now THAT you didn't find in a merchant's cart" I murmured quietly.

He laughed again, almost silently.

"You just happen to have that with you?" I asked dubiously.

He grinned and ran a hand through his hair. "Everyday... I hoped you'd come around."

"Oh John..." I trailed off, completely touched.

"So, marry me?"

I couldn't help but laugh and threw my arms around him.

"And be stuck with you forever? Absolutely."

He immediately returned the embrace, and the words echoed through my brain once again, now more true than ever; mine, mine, mine.

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Soundtrack:

Taylor Swift - Mary's Song

Counting Crows - Accidentally in Love

NeverShoutNever - Hummingbird

OMG it's actually over! I'm sad and also sooo happy that this story has come so far, and want to thank all of you for following it for so long, and putting up with my awful updating delays. Hope it was worth it. And for the last time (for now I hope) Cheers!

The Last Dance (Extra)

Yes, it's true, I've finally gotten around to writing a wedding chapter for The Last Dance.

I've truely missed writing about these characters, and I'd also like to thank everyone, new fans and old, for the great support you've given and continue to give the Last Dance. It's been done for months and still in the top 100, which shocks me everyday. Thank you, thank you, thank you. <3

The lovely cover page was made by KissMeStupid, and this chapter is dedicated to ella_enchanted, a fantastic writer herself, who's been with me from the beginning.

Comment and Vote?

Cheers,

xo.

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The Last Dance - Extra

Unroyal Wedding

I tilted my hand back and forth watching as the faint morning light bounced off a glittering diamond set in the middle of curling petals, admired how the delicate woven band changed from sparkling silver to a blushing red as if the metal were being repeatedly heated and cooled. I let out a sigh, being dazzled by the beauty yet again before pulling the wedding ring off my finger and hurling it at the door.

I paced across the floor, too nervous to sit still, too frantic to stop the barrage of insecurities that crowded my mind with every breath. Stumbling to the window I knocked into my bedside table, dislodging a pile of invitations and thank you cards. The thick sheets of parchment scattered across the floor, their dark curling letters mocking me with every brush stroke.

Throwing open the window the pale dawn light bathed the room in a rosy tint. I took in a deep breath and nearly choked on the heavy air thick with the smell of flowers. The castle seemed to be drowning in them and I longed for just a hint of the crisp cool breeze that had melted away with the last of the snow weeks ago.

Leaning against the sill my eyes passed over the room, taking in the mess of cards on the floor, the small gift boxes peeking out from under the bed and inside the closet, on top of tables or thrown in corners, some half opened while others remained pristinely unwrinkled and unwrapped.

I thought.

Reluctantly my eyes fell on the dress.

Silly to think I was ready to call off a whole wedding just because of a garment of lace and silk, when had I become so shallow?

But

, that dress.

The light blue fabric and soft grey lace should have made for a simple pretty dress, but the monstrosity before me was anything but. The skirts alone could have easily clothed a dozen people with so many layers draped over each other.

Large dropping ribbons littered the waistline, sleeves and were even spread without pattern along the skirt. With its heart shaped neckline and delicate silver beads the bodice was the only redeeming quality, but even

was ruined by the filmy layer of lace overtop and another damned bow twice the size of my fist at the dip of the neckline. The whole thing was garish and overdone, as if a dozen hands had shaped it without agreeing on a design and insisted on using every scrap of lace, silk, and satin available to them.

I couldn’t help but compare it to the outfit I was wearing now. The birthday gift from my parents when I’d turned nineteen was a similar color palette, classy yet simple, and infinitely more tasteful. But it wasn’t as if I could go out like this, no instead I would be forced to wear the weeping soggy storm cloud of a dress.

Suddenly I felt shaky picturing the thought and sat down heavily on my bed. There was no way I could face my soon to be Kingdom with any sort of dignity looking like a melting frosted cake.

One day I would have a word with the palace seamstresses, all those layers of material were completely unnecessary, and contrary to popular belief, anything but flattering.

If a bride '

on her wedding day it was surely only because the cumbersome weight of the gown threatened to suffocate her.

I groaned aloud at the thought and buried my head in my hands.

A quiet knock sounded at the door, so faint I wouldn’t have heard it if I’d still been carrying on with my earlier rampage.

"Celia?" A soft whisper sounded from the other side. I rolled my eyes even as a flutter started up in the pit of my stomach.

I sighed, contemplating ignoring him anyway when the door handle was turned down from the other side.

Only John was ill mannered enough to barge into a room without waiting for permission. Even being a Prince didn't give you

right.

I leapt up and slammed the door just as it was opening and heard a muffled '

' from the other side.

I realized I should feel bad, but I couldn’t help the slight chuckle that escaped.

Served him right, the fool…

fool.

"Let me in Cece, they'll notice any minute now I've snuck away."

I knew the people he was referring to were the menservants sent to dress him in all his Princely glory for this painstaking day.

I kept a firm hold on the door and shook my head even though he couldn't see me.

"Don't you know it's bad luck to see the… bride… on her wedding day?"

I had to choke the word out and hoped he wouldn't notice, but it was obvious he had when the pushing on the other side of the door became more insistent.

"I know that tone Cece, and you're not getting out of this. I'm coming in."

Rather then let myself be smacked by the door I moved out of the way, causing him to nearly fall to the floor as he pushed against it expecting resistance.

I know I should have laughed at the sheepish look on his face, but instead I could only feel a prickling in my eyes and blinked furiously to clear them as I turned away.

The door shut softly behind me and I heard him approach and stop just behind me.

"What's wrong Cece?"

"Everything! This whole day's wrong John and we both know it."

"Really?" He said sarcastically. "And how have you managed to convince yourself of that?"

"You've heard the whispers John, everyone thinks it's some kind of joke my becoming Queen, and I've known it all along but they all just confirm it around every corner."

He opened his mouth to object but I cut him off.

"And then there's that awful dress, and… and you shouldn't be here!" I finished lamely.

He smirked slightly, “It’s not bad luck if you’re not wearing the dress Cece.” When that failed to get a response from me his expression turned serious. He stepped forward and placed his hands on my waist, pulling me nearly into him. Even now I felt a faint blush at his easy confidence.

"It's not everyone who thinks that, in fact it's only a few and no one pays them the least bit of attention.”

"But—“

"But nothing. This is about you and I, just the two of us, do you still want that?"

"Yes" I whispered, barely audible.

He reached for my hand, resting limp by my side, and twined our fingers together.

"Then nothing else matters. Wear your practice clothes to our wedding if that’s more comfortable, we can have a duel instead of a dance if that makes you feel any better, so long as at the end of they day you're mine and mine alone and everyone knows it" He said with a teasing grin.

I couldn't help but laugh, knowing that even with the playful voice he meant every word.

"I think that would cause a right scandal John."

"Perhaps they'll be so appalled they'll stay away from court for the next few years and give us some peace" He said thoughtfully.

I punched him lightly in the arm, earning a soft smile as he grabbed my fist up and brought it to his lips for a light kiss.

I felt my face heat up and really looked at him for the first time since he'd come in. He was wearing a dusky blue surcoat with a decorative gold trim of interwoven vines and a pale almost white gold sash that his sword hung from. He looked every inch the regal Prince, but the effect was offset by his lopsided smile and the thin crown sitting crooked on his molten gold hair.

Like so often lately I caught my breath at the sight, and though I knew he'd scowl at me if I said it out loud, there was no other word to describe him but beautiful.

I forgot whatever argument had been on the tip of my tongue and forced myself to look away before I lost my mind completely.

My eyes drifted around the room and I couldn't help but glare resentfully as they landed on the mountain of a dress lying innocently at the foot of my bed. Just the sight of it had me feeling both overwhelmed and weary of the day ahead of me, pathetic.

John followed my gaze and walked over to the bed, picking up the tail end of the giant ribbon on the neckline and running it through his fingers before turning towards me, lips turning up into a slow smirk.

"Is this the problem then? It's not so bad."

"You joke about it, but

the one who has to wear the foul beast," I replied bitterly.

His amused smile stayed in place as he shrugged. "It's nothing that can't be fixed."

Before I could even ask what he meant I heard the distinct sound of cloth ripping and saw him holding the limp bow in his hand triumphantly.

“See? Better already.”

I was too speechless to respond, instead walking slowly over to the dress looking for damage, but only a few frayed ends of thread marked the place where the ribbon had been.

Well, if one could come off so easily surely the rest could as well, and the lace covering would be easy to rip away…

John clearing his throat loudly interrupted my thoughts and I turned to him with an automatic smile, only to see him lingering by the door turning something sparkling over in his hands.

I realized with a guilty flush that it was my wedding ring, the one he’d had made specially made for me.

“I dropped it.” I blurted out, not being able to stand the wounded look on his face.

It was a show of how far we’d come that he only raised an eyebrow in disbelief rather than getting upset and thinking the worst.

When I stayed silent he let out a loud sigh. “Well, I suppose I should go call the whole thing off if you don’t really want to do this…”

My mouth dropped open in shock and without hesitation I rushed over to take the ring out of his hands and slip it on. “I do.” I insisted fiercely before noticing the self-satisfied expression on his face.

I frowned indignantly as if he'd tricked some kind of confession from me and punched him in the arm.

I wasn't sure if it was more annoying that he didn't seem to feel it or that he let me go through with the action when I knew perfectly well he could catch it before getting hit.

But just as fast the annoyance was replaced with surprised when he took a small step forward and leaned down to kiss me. It was soft and sweet and took all the fight right out of me, and as always, ended too soon.

When he moved away I sighed and let him pull me down to sit next to him on the bed.

I was suddenly and

aware of our surroundings, and the fact that the door being shut would most definitely be taken as inappropriate if anyone knew we were together. I shuffled over slightly putting space between us, and noticed John do the same as we exchanged an embarrassed smile.

He cleared his throat again and shifted around to face me.

"So what's the real problem?"

My hand immediately moved to the bracelet on my left wrist, twisting it around and looking at the milky opals rather than face John, ashamed of what I had to say and rushing thought it.

"I hate that we have an audience for something so… personal. And I really thought I'd be used to the attention by now, and I

I will be some day, but I just… don’t want to share this, or you.” I mumbled.

When he didn’t respond I forced myself to look up at him and saw

self-satisfied look on his face, though I had no idea how what I’d said could have prompted it.

Noticing my confused expression he smiled and held his hand out, waiting for my to place mine on top before lacing our fingers together. And now

was the one not making eye contact, playing with the same bracelet he’d given me almost a year ago.

“If it wasn’t obvious, I’m

yours, no sharing allowed. And as for the wedding, you don’t have to share that either, not exactly that is.”

Distracted by the blush coloring his cheeks it took a moment for the second part of what he’d said to sink in, and when it had I was completely baffled.

“What are you talking about John? Most of the Kingdom’s turned out for this.”

Instead of answering he jumped to his feet and headed for the door, forcing me to get up as well and follow behind since our hands were still intertwined.

He opened the door only slightly, peering down the hallway in both directions before tugging me out behind him. He refused to say a word about where we were going or what he was doing even when I begged for an answer, but it was

obvious soon enough by the empty corridors where we were headed.

There was only one wing in the castle closed to guests until just before the ceremony, and that was the one leading to the ballroom where it would happen, the very one I was being dragged down now.

I stopped abruptly, refusing to go further without an explanation, but he only looked amused.

“You know how this ends Cece, either you walk or I carry you.” He said it playfully, but I knew the threat was meant. With a huff I dropped his hand and squared my shoulders, ready to walk past him looking indignant. Of course he ruined the attempt by giving an exaggerated comical bow as I passed him and I couldn’t help but laugh.

He caught up in two steps and linked his arm loosely through mine, walking leisurely beside me down the hall, and I couldn’t help but think it was entirely unfair how easily he seemed to handle me these days. Had I grown too predictable?

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, seeing the content set to his features, the unconscious smile…

No, it wasn’t about being predictable; he was just secure in the fact that I loved him.

I almost,

, didn’t notice the double doors now visible at the end of the hallway, but when I did my footsteps slowed down considerably.

I stopped altogether in front of the ballroom doors. Unlike before the High Ball I had avoided the place for weeks ever since preparations began. And though I would be walking down those stairs yet again in a matter of hours, I found myself unready to face what lay inside.

“Can you please tell me what you’re doing now John?”

He reached down to take my hand again, squeezing it reassuringly before whispering, “Trust me.”

I barely flinched when he pulled open the door, waving me in ahead of him. I took a deep breath and let it out before stepping in, and could do nothing but gasp at the transformation.

A long pale grey rug ran down the entire length of the ballroom, starting at the top of the stairs and ending at the other end of the room were a trellis covered in blue Lenten roses wound around the arch. The stairs banister was woven throughout with the same flowers, and along the walls were drapes in soft blues and lilacs. Golden lanterns hung along the walls in every alcove made by the drapes, and sparkling chandeliers had been lowered from the ceiling giving the whole ballroom a demure yet airy feeling. I knew once the hundreds of candles had been lit and placed the room would glow like the sky at twilight.

I only got to admire it for a second more before John was pulling my hand, leading me across the floor to the courtyard beyond.

The sun was still low in the sky, dusting the leaves in shimmering gold sunrays, adding a faint blush to the stones that lined the trail.

We were halfway down the path when I finally noticed the small crowd gathered under the heavily laden branches of the cherry blossom tree. They were talking amongst themselves and hadn’t noticed us yet, our friends and family.

“John what—“

The words died in my throat as I noticed the minister sitting on the edge of the bench with a thin leather volume in his hands, and now I knew exactly what this was.

"I had a feeling you would feel that way about the wedding, which is why I made other arrangements." He finally explained, looking proud at the gathering ahead of us.

"What about everyone waiting?" I whispered, hardly daring to believe it.

"They'll have their ceremony don't you worry."

Before I could ask what he meant he reached up to remove the gold circlet hidden in his hair. “This is just for us, I’m not any kind of Prince with you anyway,” He said ruefully.

I looked back at the tree. All the people who meant anything to me were here, and this, unlike the grand ballroom we had our backs to, was perfect.

Not knowing what to say I threw my arms around him instead. He chuckled quietly, murmuring into my hair, "The things I do for love."

I pulled back, looking him in the eye when I said, “I love you too.”

When he moved back it was to pull a chain out from under his surcoat and I noticed with a start the little ring hanging off of it was mine, the gift I'd given him forever ago. "I know." He whispered.

He winked at the surprised look on my face and then, to my bewilderment, placed his crown on top of my head.

Before I even had a chance to protest he put a finger to my lips. "Today you get to be my Princess, let me enjoy it." He teased.

I leaned up to press a kiss to his cheek and loved that something so simple could still make him blush.

Then, after telling me to wait where I was, he walked down the path, announcing our presence and sending my father in my direction.

And that was when it really hit me, this was really happening. I looked down the path to where he stood near the end, smiling when he winked, and suddenly I found I wasn't nervous at all.

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It felt like a dream, the words swirling through my head in a dizzying rush that made them incomprehensible, because all I saw was John, the sparkle in his eyes, the slight upturn of his lips like a secret held between us, and it was all I

see, as if the rest of the world had just disappeared.

I heard myself saying the same, and finally I was glad of all the time spent learning what actions to take when, because all thoughts of protocol had fled my mind with just a glance from him.

We were led forward, and I was grateful for the steady presence of my father beside me as more words were spoken, and my hand was placed in John’s, and just in that simple touch I really understood it, that getting married meant always having a hand to hold, and just that was worth it.

Now the rings were being exchanged, and I heard the vows spilling from my mouth mirroring what John had just said, and what had sounded so rehearsed in the quiet hours of the night before now resonated through me like a thousand harps plucked at once, and I could feel every word.

Then a chalice was passed to us, held up for one another to drink.

Belatedly I heard the sound of applause, and it was like walking up from a dream, or taking my first breath after holding it in.

John turned to me with a radiant smile, like he couldn't believe his luck, and truthfully neither could I.

"Finally" He breathed, pulling me close to his side as our friends and family rushed to engulf us, many of them muttering the same.

“It’s about time Prince Blockhead!” Luke yelled cheerfully.

“He’s your responsibility now Cee, don’t even think about giving him back.”

I laughed as John tried to smack David around the head, only landing a glancing blow when he ducked out of the way.

“You know, this would be a

time to defend your husband Cece," he said with a fake wounded look.

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The word sent a surprising thrill through me and I fought to hold back a smile, instead giving a dramatic sigh, ready to humor him. "He's not a complete Blockhead Luke, he was smart enough to marry me after all."

"I wouldn't give him too much credit Cee, we all get lucky sometimes" Mason threw in.

John rolled his eyes, but his smile only grew wider as the boys laughed and slapped him across the back offering congratulations.

"It's hardly fair Cee, you were the last of us to turn nineteen yet somehow the first to get married" Mira said with a pout, her eyes teasing.

Lily jumped in before I had a chance to respond. "And to a Prince no less, how are we ever to compete?"

"Easily I'd say, aside from being a Prince, John's not much of a catch."

John left my side to go punch David, and in seconds all the boys were laughing and play fighting. I shook my head at them and looked past my friends to see my parents and John's waiting on the side. The mother's looked teary and the Father's tried to hold it back, but I could see the King looking at his son as if he was seeing him for the first time.

I walked over to my parents, being pulled into a fierce hug by my mother before being traded off to my father.

“That boy would give you the world,” He murmured.

“I know dad” I said, following his gaze back to where the boys were still fooling around, trying to push each other to the ground.

He turned back to me, and I could see the tears in his eyes. “And I know you’d do the same for him.”

My gaze drifted back to John, our eyes meeting for a second before he fell forward. “Yes, I would.”

“Good. Take care of each other.” I nodded, feeling a little teary eyed myself as my father gently pushed me towards the King and Queen.

They acknowledged me with bright happy smiles, and we all just stood facing each other for a while, as if no words needed to be said, but when the King spoke up it was far from what I was expecting.

“We’ve always wanted you for him.”

I blinked in surprise as the King’s smile widened lighting up his features, and I finally saw where John got it from.

“You have?”

“Of course dear,” The Queen said softly, “You’ve always been family.”

Uncle Jeoffrey nodded his agreement and abruptly pulled me into a great bear hug. I noticed over his shoulder that John had made his way over to my parents.

I watched him and my father talking as if they were old friends rehashing memories, which seemed odd since I’d

never seen them talk before. When John noticed me looking he gave my parents a hug and walked over, his smile getting brighter with each step.

His mother threw her arms around him tightly and the King joined in on the hug, a show of emotion they rarely ever shared with each other.

When they pulled back the Queen had to dab at her eyes with a cloth and the King nodded at his son in approval.

His voice was rough with emotion when he said, “Well done son,” and slapped him on the back, causing John to almost pitch forward face first. I had to slap a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing at his expression, the same as it had been when we were kids and his father had done the same, only now everything was different.

He straightened up and wrapped an arm around my waist, shaking his head at my giggles as he led us away from his parents and towards the cherry blossom tree. “My wife will forever be laughing at me,” He muttered quietly.

I turned my head to kiss his cheek again and he placed his hand under my chin, placing a soft kiss on my lips before we were surrounded again.

Wine glasses had turned up from somewhere and joking toasts started being made, most of them making fun of John, and all of them coming from the boys.

He tolerated them without protest and grinned whenever I said something in his defense, and I thought again how perfect this all was, just us, our friends and family teasing and making fun of each other.

It was just nearing afternoon when our gathering broke up, though it felt as if we'd spent the whole day here. Everyone went off in different directions, having to check on last minute preparations for the wedding the rest of the Kingdom was expecting.

I'd almost forgotten about that.

"You mean its still happening?" I asked, remembering abruptly the palace full of wedding guests waiting for a ceremony.

"Well, we can't very well send them home, or deny them the chance to see their Prince getting married, so we'll just have to go out there and fake it." He replied cheerfully.

My mouth dropped slightly open in alarm.

"John we can't fake it!"

"Why not? They wont know the difference, it will be the same thing really, only

know we're already married," He said with a conspiratorial wink.

"Only you would think of something like this," I said with a rueful smile, stopping to look at him outside my door.

"Anything for you Cece" He said with an easy smile before pulling me closer him to once again and sighing contentedly.

I walked into the room, suddenly undaunted by the greeting cards littering the floor, excited about opening the rest of the wedding gifts that were scattered around the room.

Of course there was still one little problem…

As if reading my thoughts, John walked over to the bed to grab the gown, and pushed it into my hands with a laugh.

"Here, put on the ugly dress or I'll force you into it myself, I can do that now you know" He teased suggestively.

I pushed him away, blushing furiously as he lost his balance and collapsed on the bed, laughing at my reaction. Some things would clearly never change, and yet, I couldn't bring myself to mind.

The End

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